

13 September 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Six weary months have passed since we closed the Church's doors. But you'll have heard by now that the Session have given the 'green light' for a cautious re-opening of the sanctuary next Sunday.

All we are saying is 'Give Church a Chance'

Because we must heed all health and safety rules, we'll not be allowed to pack the pews and sit 'cheek-by-jowl'...you know, the way we used to do. Remember how hard it was to find a seat back then? No, I don't either. But it may be harder now. And when we do sit down, we may not be in our usual pew. That's because we'll be 'spaced out' at Church; not 'dazed and confused' but 'socially distant' from each other. This will severely limit the number of people our cosy sanctuary can accommodate.

Anticipating this, the Session have authorised two service times. The first will be at 9 a.m., the second at 10:30 a.m. Early polls indicate there will be a rush on the second one, but room-to-spare at 9 a.m. Fancy that! Perhaps it's because late risers will need extra time for an extra cup of coffee at home, for there will be no coffee hour after the worship service. So, for those who like to set the alarm for an early hour, the 9 a.m. service may be the best bet.

You'll be asked to RSVP, as you would for any notable occasion, so that ushers can be suitably prepared. Check your email 'inbox' and reply with your intentions. If you don't have email, you may expect a phone call. If you receive no phone call, do feel free to call your elder. If, when you arrive, the ushers decree where you must sit, bear in mind that they're not being high-handed; they're just doing their best to follow protocols.

The Church is no one's private chapel. It's a public space. Church property is the personal property of no one. Christian worship is not hidden and secretive, but open and visible. The Minister is not the host of a religious show. God is the true host in God's own house. We come as Christ's body for worshipful encounter with the living God.

So, an atmosphere of 'insiders' vs 'outsiders' has no place in a sanctuary, though it often feels that way from a visitor's perspective. If newcomers arrive, we'll include them and adapt as best we can. We always have.

The service will ‘feel’ very different. The choir will not assemble and sing. The congregation will sing no hymns. That will seem cheerless. On the other hand, the inimitable Angus Sinclair will be seated at the organ (hurrah!) to play preludes and postludes, and to accompany soloists.

The offering plates will not be passed around, though you’ll still be able to place your offering in one of the plates as you enter or leave. We’ll ‘pass the peace’ verbally, as we always have – (“The peace of Christ be with you all” ... “*And also with you*”) – but we won’t greet each other with handshakes or hugs.

We’ll still recite a Psalm and hear Scripture read aloud (followed by a brief-but-outstanding sermon!). We’ll pray as we always have and speak our responses out loud too. Above all, we’ll be in God’s and each other’s presence.

We haven’t yet figured out how to celebrate Holy Communion ‘safely’ without, at the same time, disfiguring its meaning, which is about *sharing* in an event that’s both material and spiritual. But I’m confident we’ll find a way, eventually.

Faceless Anonymity

We’ll be wearing facemasks in the sanctuary too. If you don’t have one, you can pick one up and don it as you enter.

Sadly, the choice to wear a mask, or not, has become a marker of one’s ‘political brand’ in the United States – are you Right or Left, Republican or Democrat? That’s silly. May we never lapse into such hot-headed factionalism. Canadians understand and accept why we ought to wear facemasks. But no one should be required to enjoy it.

Covering our faces with facemasks has *uncovered*, for me, just how vital the human face is for registering our presence to each other. At long meetings, a phalanx of facemasks makes me feel I’m addressing the stone statues on Easter Island. I, in turn, must look as grim and glum as they do. It puts me in a foul mood. This comes from the mistaken impression that they’re in a foul mood too.

Facemasks hinder communication, our ability to ‘interface’, not just by muffling our voices, but by obscuring our expressions, our smiles and scowls, our intakes of breath signalling a readiness to speak, the pursed lip that suggests seriousness, the lax look that bespeaks boredom, the sarcastic smirk, or the generous demeanour that says, “I’m with you, here and now.”

We wear figurative masks too: the fake smile, the placid appearance of dormant anger, the engaged look of suppressed boredom. We do this, both consciously and unconsciously, because we want to keep people from seeing us as we truly are, and from fear of seeing it ourselves. But something real always leaks out.

An unmasked face is the 'focus point' for personality, a threshold between the inner and outer self, making someone's character legible. When we gaze at portraits, statues, and photos, our eyes migrate to the face. The same is true when we meet each other 'face to face'. When we're abashed, nervous, or angry, we hide our faces. We're afraid of the other person's gaze, or we disdain them so much we refuse to look at them.

"Show your face!" shouts the policeman to a cornered criminal cowering behind a door. "Passport," mumbles the border guard, who scrutinises the traveller's sleep-deprived face against the unflattering photo.

When Oliver Cromwell's men smashed religious statues in an orgy of Puritan vandalism, they'd often smash only the face. Perhaps they were pressed for time, having a backlog of things to smash awaiting in the next village.

When he left for a long trip, Roberston Davies chided himself in a letter to his wife. "It was stupid of me to come away without a picture of you," he wrote. He missed her and longed to see her face.

The Reverend John Ames, the central figure in Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*, recalls the children he has held and baptized. "It has something to do with the incarnation," he says. "You feel your obligation to a child when you have seen it and held it. Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it."

It's the same wild hope St Paul felt. "All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another" (2 *Corinthians* 3:18).

Yours in the faith,
Andrew