



## *The Messenger* *September 2021*

### *Rector's Corner*

As many parts of the nation begin to beat a retreat against the coronavirus, with the new Delta variant taking its toll, the great debate of personal rights versus community responsibility has intensified in toxicity and migrated into new battlegrounds, like over mask mandates for school children. Meanwhile, the virus, true to its nature, remains indifferent to these arguments.

From time to time, I hear a common lament: “How did this pandemic get so political?” The evasive yet perhaps diplomatic answer is, God only knows. Recently, I was asked by a friend to casually weigh in on the mask mandate debate in schools from a theological perspective, and, since I was driving home from New York at the time, I had plenty of time to ponder. Their state, like ours, has issued a mandate for all schools K-12. My friend sits on the board of a private Christian school considering defying their state’s order in the name of religious freedom. My friend supports masking while a number of fellow board members do not.

In putting together their case for the board’s discussion, my friend was leaning on Romans 13:1, which says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities for there is not authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” This verse from Paul’s letter is problematic on a good day, and every tyrant in the history of rule by divine right would give a resounding, “Amen!” Keeping the discussion in our present context, what would this passage mean for school

boards in Texas with the opposite problem: defying their governor in the interest of masking their students to keep them safe?

One of the issues with this verse is that biblical scholars are not entirely sure what Paul meant by it. The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge writes, “scholars have noted the tension, if not contradiction, between the perspective expressed here and Paul’s view that the form of the world is passing away (1 Cor. 7:31) and that the rulers of the world are ignorant of the purposes of God (1 Cor. 2:6-8; 15:51-58). The counsel against resistance seems at odds with the exhortation not to conform to the world (Rom. 12:1-2). Some critics have evaluated the counsel to be so out of place that they judge that the passage is not a part of the original letter.” What was Paul’s objective here? Was he expressing an eschatological resignation to governing authorities of this world, knowing that ultimately God’s justice will prevail? Was he simply trying to keep followers of Christ from crossing the brutal Roman authorities? Is there some very specific part of his context that we do not quite understand? The irony is, Paul’s explicit tone only prompts more questions.

I decided to recommend an alternative route to my friend. Instead of coming at it from a matter of obedience to civil authorities or not, a political approach, try coming at it from a matter of Christian ethics. Being a Christian school, whose mission is no doubt partly to teach following Christ and his commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself, something Paul references just a few verses later in Romans 13:9, how does defying a government mandate to wear a mask fulfill this mission? How does defiance on this particular issue support the Christian ethic of love and service of others? Romans 13:5 does say, “Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.” How does inviting the possibility of even one child getting sick, when masks have proven effective when worn properly, support a decision of the moral conscience, Christian or otherwise?

The short answer is it doesn't. It is a stance based on the fear of losing autonomy that is unfortunately stronger than the sense of duty to others. My friend, having far better scriptural recall than I do, found a passage that fit this pretty well in 1 Peter 2:15-17, which says, "For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers." What's more tragic is that the entire debate is driven by an adult fear. It's not the kids. As FHN's Infection Preventionist Margie Kochsmier observed in today's newspaper, most young people aren't all that bothered by wearing masks. As a parent, I can attest that aside from a general annoyance, they do not feel that inhibited by the prospect of wearing a mask. Our daughter does taekwondo in a mask, and for all I can tell, it makes her feel more like the ninja she hopes the class is going to make her.

All of this is to say, I know we are weary and I know returning to wearing masks and other safety protocols is a huge chip at our morale, especially given how close to "normal" we had gotten. But we still have a responsibility to each other. These protocols are what we can control right now, and they are the least we can do to protect ourselves, each other, and our little ones who look to us to model the way of Christ Jesus. We will get through this together. We will persevere through the setbacks and continue to celebrate the small victories for as long as it takes, because the power of God, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, even in, especially in, difficult times.

Blessings,  
Fr. Brian

## ***Treasurer's Report***

Over the last three years Grace Church has been able to accumulate cash reserves totaling \$98,000. These cash reserves are the church's emergency fund so if we have major problems such as replacing our boiler, air conditioner etc. we will have the funds available.

As long as we are holding these funds, waiting for an emergency, we have started to invest them to get a higher percent of return on the money. We are working with Thrivent Financial Services. Thrivent is a faith based not for profit financial services organization. They have an office in Freeport so we will have an agent available to advise us about the products they offer that will meet our needs.

Please feel free to call me if you have any questions.

Duane Price 815-233-0006

## ***Grace Church News & Upcoming Events***

***Thank you*** all of Grace's congregation for the wonderful response to the UTO fund. At present we have \$451.20 to support grants awarded to special needs around the USA and the world. Every bit we can add to the National UTO fund is so important and I'm proud of the impact our donation will make to this much needed outreach of the Episcopal Church.

Thank you all again for your participation in gratitude to God for our many blessings.

Hugs to you all, Phyllis

***Bluetooth compatible hearing aids*** - if you are interested in having them linked to our new sound system please contact the church office.

***First Friday meeting*** in the undercroft at 11:30am on Friday, September 3rd. We'll be reviewing the Eats and Beats Festival fundraiser, and discussing the fall Rummage Sale October 1st and 2nd. Please bring your own lunch to the meeting.

***Vestry Meeting*** Sunday, September 19th, 10:30am.

***Deadline*** for the October "Messenger" will be September 21st

## ***Warden's Report***

By the time you read this, Stephenson County may have dropped from current High transmission of virus back down to Substantial transmission. A few weeks ago, we went from a Moderate transmission rate to Substantial and back to masks in worship per the CDC recommendations. When will we go back to a Moderate transmission rate? Well, it depends on us and our neighbors to follow some simple guidelines: Wear masks inside places with more people than fit around your dining room table in a space no larger than your living room; get vaccinated; socially distance; wash your hands or use alcohol-based hand cleaners frequently, especially when not at home. Why wash your hands? Humans are notorious for rubbing without awareness our eyes and our noses, the later a good place for viruses. Then folks push doors and handles and we do the same.

When is the pandemic done? It is much easier to find answers to when will it peak and slowly get better. The Institute for Health Metrics Evaluation estimates that Illinois is close to peaking in days. Hospitalization rates will peak about a week or two later. Deaths, about a week or two after that. Looking at Stephenson County's case rate, we have started to flatten out and maybe even drop a bit over the past several days. It won't just disappear fast, however. Not enough folks are vaccinated.

Like all good statistics, the guesses of peaks are based on probabilities of mask use rates, vaccination rates, and compliance with social distancing and hand washing. Those are things we can all do to help the peaks arrive when estimated or sooner.

Glenn Gungel  
Senior Warden

*September*



6th Cynthia Bradbury

9th Phyllis Bergagna

Skip Lehnhard

Brian Douglas Mitchell

12th Kathy Helm

13th Sue Norman

13th Ashly Shore

20th John Gush

29th Ruslan Bolotnik

30th Nancy Bender

Cathy Perkins

9th Chad & Katie Enright

23rd Stephen & Susan Lafferty

- God promises a safe landing, not a calm passage.

—Anonymous

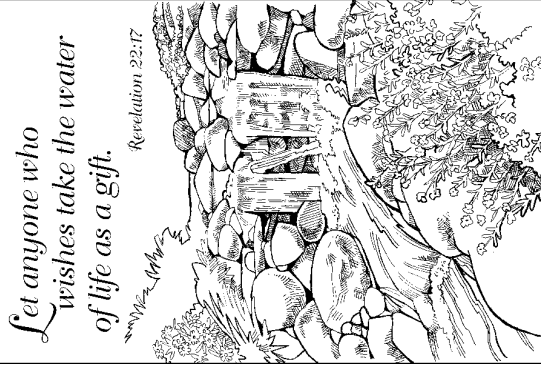
- People see God every day; they just don't recognize him.

—Pearl Bailey

- When you get to your wit's end, you'll find God is right there to offer you strength and guidance.

—Anonymous

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September Newsletter