

Dear Church Family

Acts 2:1-21

“Dear Church Family.”

That is how I start every letter I write to you, every article I put in the Tidings, and, lately, every article I write for the weekly newsletter.

“Dear Church Family.”

Maybe like me, you were taught at school to begin a letter with “*Dear so-and-so...*”; *Dear Mr. Johnson; Dear Mrs. Smith; Dear friend.*

It’s a powerful word – a word that implies dignity and worth in the person receiving the letter. It can imply familial affection and even a level of intimacy. When I write my mother a letter, I don’t start it with “Hey, Mom” or “Yo, moms.” I begin it with “*Dear Mama.*”

Do you hear the shift in tone? Can you feel the deeper sense of connection?

“*Dear Church Family.*”

That is how the letter the Executive Council and I wrote to you earlier this week began.

What a tough letter it was to write.

I started that letter Sunday after worship a week ago, and finished it finally on Monday around noon. It took me about 24 hours, and I don’t know, eight drafts to get it out and on paper.

I spent hours on the phone with our denominational Ministry and Mission Coach, Rev. Mike Oldham, with our own church member and medical doctor, Jay Neubauer, with members of our Executive Council, and with pastors here in the city and across the nation – all these pastors struggling to figure out what to do, what is best, what is most important, what is the “right” thing in this moment.

So much has changed in the last few weeks. This virus has exposed us yet again to how little control we have in this world – something so small that it can’t be seen with the human eye has changed our way of life.

Did you ever think it would become normal fare in our city to go to the grocery store and see fewer people without masks on than those wearing masks?

If I had been in a coma since February and woken up last week, my first trip to the grocery store would make me think that I'd woken up in an alternate reality! I would have sworn that I'd woken up in the *Twilight Zone*! This is the stuff science fiction is based on — and it is now our reality.

So much has changed.

Think for just a minute with me if you will about what makes worship *feel* like worship at First Baptist Church. If it helps, close your eyes. Use your imagination. What makes worship *feel* like worship at FBC?

Is it that we light the Christ Candle and chime in the worship hour each week? That maybe vitally important to some of us — but it may just be more important to your pastor than you!

Is it that we say the “Lord’s Prayer” together? Maybe, you even think that makes us look like a strange cult. What would a guest think if they walked in one Sunday while we were all chanting the same words together in unison? Maybe it’s not that we recite the “Lord’s Prayer” together.

Is it listening to the sermon? I mean, I can’t blame you. I could listen to me all day — which, in quarantine, has driven my poor wife to the point of mental break.

Is it putting money in the offering plate as it’s passed by? Is it doodling on the bulletin when your mind wanders? Is it sleeping during the sermon — which Claire has definitely never done?

The reality is — as comforting and as nostalgic as all those things are — I doubt they’re really what make worship *feel* like worship at First Baptist Church.

More likely, the thing that makes worship *feel* like worship here is: *who* it was that passed you the offering plate; *who* it was that handed you the elements for communion; *who* it was that shook your hand at the door and handed you that bulletin that you doodled on; *who* it was that nudged you to wake you up when you started snoring during the sermon — which, to be clear, Claire has definitely never done.

I’m guessing the thing that makes worship really *feel* like worship at FBC, are not the motions we go through each Sunday, but *who* it is that is going through those motions *with us*.

Now, imagine with me, if you can, what a worship hour in this place would *feel* like under the current situation and abiding proposed measures for safety all our safety.

Imagine entering the church through the atrium only, as all people are encouraged to enter and exit through one door.

Imagine a station as you came in, with a person standing there. They ask, “Do you have a fever?” and they take your temperature before they let you in.

Imagine no Fellowship Time downstairs — no strawberries or cheese or doughnuts, no coffee, and no sitting at a table with beloved friends.

Imagine walking into the sanctuary, where no one shakes your hand or hands you a bulletin as you enter. Instead you’re instructed to take a squirt of hand sanitizer and to pick up your own bulletin from a pile on the table.

Imagine the pews have been taped off designating where you can and cannot sit — sorry to those of you whose names are seemingly engraved in your seats! Instead, everyone is sitting on the end caps only — and only on every other aisle, with no one in the center of the pews. The family who usually sits right next to you is now two rows behind you... and on the opposite end cap.

Imagine being allowed to sit only with the people who live in your house. For many of us, that means imagining sitting all alone... in church.

Imagine the service beginning. You look around. Everyone is wearing masks. You can only see their eyes. The Christ Candle is lit by, who you believe to be, Marti Wells, but you can’t tell for sure in that mask. There is no moment when we greet each other in the name of the Lord — which may be a relief to the introverts in our family, but would be a real struggle for those of us who get our weekly allotment of hugs during that time.

Imagine there is no praise music, no congregational hymns, no choir — because we’ve learned in recent days that the risk of singing together in a confined space is higher than coughing.

Imagine no hymnals or Bibles in the pew backs, so that we don’t risk cross contamination. We don’t pass the offering plate, but instead encourage you to drop your offering to God in the box by the door, like it’s a comment card going into a suggestion box.

Imagine no communion — at least not like we used to. There will be no servers passing cups of juice and plates of crackers. Instead, we use those all-in-one, cups with crackers and juice already enclosed. Someone with a latex glove and mask on handed it to you as you entered the sanctuary.

Imagine having to physically restrain children from trying to hug their friends, because they don’t understand it.

No greeters. No ushers. No servers. No singing. No hugs. No handshakes. No sitting next to people you love and miss. No ability to see people’s faces because of their masks. *None* of the things that make worship at FBC actually *feel* like worship.

Instead, worship would feel like a hollow shell of what we've come to expect.

So much has changed. And when I sit down and imagine what it would be like to try and worship together like that right now, it is easy for me to become discouraged... disheartened, even.

Maybe you find yourself feeling like I feel.

I can't help but believe that the disciples felt discouraged when dawn broke that morning. Jesus was no longer with them.

The glow of the resurrection was on the front of their minds, but the world had already forgotten all about those events. They'd been down in numbers since Judas' despair of being forgiven had driven him to take his own life. So they cast lots for his replacement. Can you imagine that – your chances of becoming one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ resting on your ability to throw "snake eyes?"

So much had changed, and... it didn't seem for the better.

That's when the festival of Pentecost came. It was always fifty days after the Passover in Jewish life – hence the name *Pente-cost* – like the five-sided *Pentagon*, to our modern ears.

Jews from all over the known world pilgrimaged to Jerusalem. They had to, because they believed that if they wanted to encounter the living God, they had to at the holy temple, in the holiest of cities, on that holy mountain. This was God's dwelling place – the place where God reached down and touched the earth with his finger. If you wanted to meet with God, you came here. And if you wanted to ensure an encounter, you came on a high, holy day, like Pentecost.

You can imagine the bustle of it all, people from every tribe and nation sitting in the outer courts of the temple, the market swarming, different languages and accents and dialects from all over the world echoing in the ears of passerby.

That's when it happened. The wind changed direction – violently. At moments, it seemed to be rushing at them straight down from heaven itself. It was almost like it had a life of its own. It circled between their legs and wrapped them in its fingerless grasp, before settling on them all and making it so that no matter what language they spoke, they could understand each other in their own language.

And the rest is history.

Some have called it the birth of the church. Others have pointed out how what happened at Pentecost could be considered a reversal of what God did at Babel.

What it was was a pouring out of God's spirit onto his people. And it matters because it meant that God was with us in a new and powerful way.

You see, before Jesus, the Jewish faith had come to believe that God dwelt on Mt. Zion in the holy city of Jerusalem, in the holy of holies in the temple. Sure God was everywhere, but if you wanted to worship, to encounter God there was really only one place you could do that — at the temple. You *had* to be at the temple to be close to God.

When Jesus came, he not only showed us who God intended for us to be, but he also showed us who God really was. He gave God a face, and on that face, we learned, was a smile. But even Jesus was bound by the limitations of his physical reality. He could only occupy one space at a time, and so if you wanted to be in the presence of God's son, you had to crowd a beach and hear him preach from the stern of a boat or find a seat on a mountainside or touch the hem of his garment in the midst of a throng of people. You *had* to be close to Jesus to be close to God's son.

But at Pentecost, God poured out God's spirit on his people like a rush of wind — no longer bound by the confines of the temple, no longer bound to the confines of high, holy days. The spirit of God was now as close as your next breath.

Do you know what that moment means?

It means that we are joined not by *where* we worship or *when* we worship, but by *Whom* we worship — and, at Pentecost, God declared his spirit would not be restrained to a time or place.

What binds us together — what binds me to you and you to me — is not an hour spent together each Sunday morning in a building on the corner of Kiowa and Weber. What binds us together — no matter where are, no matter how physically separated we are — is the Spirit of God.

Church is not an hour. Church is not even a place. Church is a *people*.

Do you remember on Christmas eve when we were packed into the pews of this place like sardines, each holding a candle, shoulder to shoulder, singing "Silent Night" as we celebrated the birth of the Christ child?

That was a good night. *That* is what we really miss — sitting with our loved ones, celebrating the presence of God in our lives, the chance at new life, finding a holy moment to be in communion with God and each other.

Afterwards, I couldn't stop smiling as I watched families mingle by the Christmas tree, taking photos, and hugging each other as they wished one another "Merry Christmas."

I watched as friends who hadn't seen each other in a long time smiled and laughed and shook hands and hugged. Before I stepped out the door to head home for an evening

with my wife, I looked back over my shoulder and smiled as I said to myself, “*This is my family.*”

One of the things the quarantine has taught me is that I misread my church.

You see, I used to believe that *worship* was the thing that bound us and held us together. I’d say that worship was the single most important thing we do, because in worship we find our *being*, so that we might find our *doing* in the world.

I still believe worship is vitally important for us individually and for the life of our family of faith. But in recent days, I’ve begun to suspect that I’d created an idol out of worship. I’d convinced myself that Sunday morning worship was the thing on which our community was built.

I was wrong.

What quarantine and this new way of being church has taught me is that worship isn’t the heartbeat of our community. Rather, it is our *community* that is the heartbeat of our worship.

We haven’t been able to worship together in our sanctuary since March 8. As of today, it has been eighty-four days since we hugged, shook hands, greeted each other in the name of the LORD – and, yet, we are still First Baptist Church.

Though we can’t yet be together, we are still praying for one another.

Though we can’t yet be together, we are still calling our next resident and seeking opportunities to serve others.

Though we can’t yet be together, we are still caring for others and connecting with those we love and miss.

Though we can’t yet be together, we are still *worshipping together* – by the power of God’s spirit, which is not bound by our schedules or to our building.

Though we can’t yet be together, we are still *the church*.

And, no number of days apart can change that.

What a gift it is to serve as pastor to you, my Dear Church Family.

Amen.