

Well, this is not the sermon or worship service I had in mind for us last month when I was finalizing the plans of this Dream Big series. This isn't even the sermon I imagined last week as I drove home from worship. But as we continue to learn over and over again as this pandemic continues on-- we should expect the unexpected. We can have all the plans in the world, but as I've said again and again-- this virus has been teaching us that life happens at the most inconvenient times.

The first time I heard COVID-19 mentioned in the context of worship was during prayer time at my last congregation-- an 8 year old girl named Nora asked us to pray for those in China as the virus swept their nation. Little did she or I or any of us know that it was coming our way next. I'm sure some of you have been and are asking how do we even dream when this is the world we live in? Where even after a vaccine is free and available in our own country that cases are still going up? Or how can we have such access to the vaccine and the citizens of other countries do not? How is it fair to go through something this bad for this long?

How can a virus put a halt to so many of the things we love about life? So many of the things that make life worth living. And church, there are no easy answers-- some of these questions have no answer at all. I can't imagine what this has been like for you-- the kids and teenagers and college students --struggling to learn online, the ones in multi-generational homes and without desks to do school from home without grandparents to help be their teachers or who did not have internet. I can't imagine what it's like for you who are parents and guardians-- to watch these younger ones they love struggle with not just school, but with anxiety and depression. I can't imagine what it's been like for parents and grandparents to not see their kids for months, for a year.

I can't imagine what it's like for you who are immune-compromised or taking medicine that decreases the effectiveness of your vaccine and having to go into a world with less and less masks and not knowing people's vaccination status. I can't imagine the pain of those of you who have lost loved ones to this virus or other causes and have not been able to grieve how you deserve, to not be able to celebrate their life as they deserve; I know many of you are still carrying that grief. I can't imagine what it was like for those of you with loved ones with memory loss-- how they woke up in an even more confusing world day after day and regardless of everything else you still had to love them and care for them.

I can't imagine what it has been like for you who worry about what this pandemic has done to our church, our local church Lake Oswego United Methodist, and its future after being

in this season where a lot of what we normally do has been cut back. I don't know what burdens you have carried this year-- the work or the school stress, the family stress, your own depression and anxiety, your fear and worries. You know they say to walk a mile in someone else's shoes-- but I just don't think we can ever fully understand someone else's life experience. I cannot know your heart and what makes it heavy better than you.

I can only tell you what it's been like for me-- and that the deepest heart break this pandemic has brought me is all the things we haven't been able to do-- and I know the privilege I have in saying that's the biggest loss. I came here 13 months ago and that has been filled with a lot of hard decisions. Not just for me or Pastor Michelle, our lead pastor, but for our staff and re-entry team that has navigated this pandemic together, and also all of this church-- from church council, to our ministry committees like worship and outreach, our youth and kids' teams-- together we've had to make tough decisions about ministry-- about worship, about gathering, about all the things that make church church and more times than we have liked we've had to say no, have had to change plans, have had to disagree. A few weeks ago it was Vacation Bible School, this week it is about us having to wear masks again.

If these decisions have been difficult for you to hear-- or to make-- I want to be clear and say they have been made with your health, your wellness, your life, on our hearts and in our minds. And I hope that you have been doing the same-- all of our decisions in this season, not just in the church but in your life, must center on health: the health of you and your loved ones, of our church and our community's safety. Maybe centering on health isn't the best way to phrase that since that can feel too academic or nebulous-- but maybe centering on how to love our neighbor in a time unprecedented.

How do we love our neighbors in a time such as this? We protect them and ourselves-- we get vaccinated, we stay masked, we wash our hands, we stay distanced, we go to the grocery store once a week, we send notes to our friends and families, we Facetime, we go for walks. Just as any other time, we love with our words and our actions-- and these are what those actions look like in this season. We had a lot of learning to do in the beginning of this, but now we know and we can do it.

And I know it's hard-- so many of us are tired. We had a taste ofprecedented times and feel like we're back where we were months ago. But take heart, beloved church. Every day is an opportunity to love our neighbor and witness to the abundant life made known to us in the ministry of Jesus. The abundant life that these four fishermen threw everything aside for.

Abundant life is something known in our physical bodies, in the here and now-- as we seek to make the world a better place for all-- when we walk the path towards abundant life it is a testament to all the world that hope is possible, that love is possible and that hope and love are here, that redemption and grace and abundance are here. And it has been a heavy year to be that witness.

But, it can be hard to think about being a witness to abundant life to others when we don't feel it in our own lives. As I said earlier, I know we have all had different kinds of heavinesses, different burdens to carry, throughout this season. But, nonetheless I imagine we've all had at least a few cards in our deck we'd like to trade-- I think many of us have been moving up and down and zig zag through the stages of grief-- shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, I know I have been in so many of those stages at so many different times.

If you've spent time with the stages you know they do not go in a linear fashion-- instead they can go around and around, back and forth, jump around-- one minute we're in shock at the increase in numbers, the next anger at those who you blame for what's happening, and then shock again as a loved one gets the disease-- shock at schools canceled, then depression from the isolation, then acceptance of things just being the way they are, to be depressed from missing school and then angry at people who aren't getting vaccinated-- over and over back and forth we move through shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance-- up and down, back and forth. We all have had grief after grief and I know we've tried our best to keep on keeping on-- to stay the course-- to keep moving forward-- but sometimes we just need to name a spade and spade and admit this has been one of, if not the worst, roller coaster we've ever ridden. We've lost a lot and when I looked this morning our world has lost 4 million, two hundred and ninety eight thousand, three hundred and thirty-three lives. Those are friends, those are children, those are parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, great-great parents-- and those lives were our neighbors in the Christian sense-- those lives, those people, were and are beloved in the eyes of God.

And we all know the names of some of those numbers. Let us do whatever is within our power to keep that number from going up. And those actions that keep cases down-- that is living as Jesus has called us to live. Washing hands, wearing masks, staying distanced, sending notes-- that is what Jesus would do. He believed in working for the common good. Just like he called to these men by the sea, Jesus is still calling us, calling us to follow. He is

telling us to cast aside our nets-- whatever those things are, the things that hold us back from doing what's right.

You know, I didn't know this until recently but that piece about becoming fishers of people isn't actually about saving souls and converting mass amounts of people with incredible evangelism-- it is actually an image from Jeremiah 16-- in this Hebrew Bible scripture the symbol is used to express judgment on Israel-- judgment upon the rich and powerful for not loving the marginalized, the vulnerable, the poor, the suffering among them-- for not sharing food with them, clothing them, inviting them, visiting them, housing them. Jesus is not inviting these men on a crusade for Christ to convert all of the countryside with only the power of a good sermon-- he's inviting them to join him in the struggle for love-- a love marked by justice and equity, a struggle that centers on bringing about abundant life for all, especially those whom life is hardest for. Jesus is inviting them to take the next step towards a more loving and more just world where all have what they need to thrive. Church-- that was and is God's dream-- that all have what they need to thrive.

And this, this is the same choice that we have today as cases rise. That in this world full of fear and anxiety-- right now, and tomorrow, and the day after you have a choice to love your neighbor as yourself, to do what you can to protect those who are afraid, those who are vulnerable. And I think if we're honest with ourselves-- we're all a little afraid and vulnerable right now-- and it would feel so good to know others were taking care of us too. Imagine how beautiful the world would be if we were all living like that-- with our hearts and minds set on being sure that everyone down to the most vulnerable was protected.

That is why we have decided to mask again, to embody in this small way our Christian conviction to love our neighbors and ourselves-- to witness to our God who is calling us to take part in their dream for all to know abundant life. We are doing this out of love for each other and in the belief that our actions big and small matter. By doing this we are true fishers of people-- this is following Jesus-- following Jesus is not marked by having a million people back in worship--but by doing what is right, by taking actions that not only save lives, but bring about abundant life.

I wish I could say this was over, that the end was in sight, and it could be just over the horizon but we just don't know. But, what we do know is today we can love our neighbors as we have called to do.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Junior said “faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” How true is that for us not just in this pandemic but in life as a whole? And I think that is always what it’s meant to be a follower of Jesus. That we do the next right thing in faith, in hope, in love, and that as we take that step we’ll see the next and do it again, and the next and do it again. We never know what is going to come our way, but we can take one step in the direction that we know that is most just and most loving-- that is most Christ-like. And we can take that step in faith that we do not do it alone, that God is with us, that Christ calls us, that the Spirit is moving in us. Whether you’re online or in person-- look around at all these people-- look at the number of how many are worshipping online with you or who have worshipped-- God is present here as each of you are present here-- and it is in times such as this we are reminded why community is so important to God, because we need each other.

We do not take any step alone. You are not alone. We have each other to walk this journey with. If you are feeling alone-- pick up the phone, write a letter or an email, reach out. And even if you are not feeling alone, you’re reaching out could be a lifeline to somewhere here or in your life. Anyone can use encouragement at any time.

My senior year of high school was probably one of the most tumultuous of my life-- my family life was super chaotic and over the course of that year I didn’t know if I’d be able to go to college, didn’t know if I’d have a car, a place to live, or even a cell phone. I was so scared of what would come of my life. But, alas, still had to go to class and one day AP English teacher Mrs. Brown, gave us a task. She handed us pieces of paper and envelopes and had us write notes to ourselves that she would mail to us in a year. I remember taking so much time to think about what I would say and even putting a \$5 bill in the letter, but didn’t even know where to mail it. I had already moved once a year for the past three years and didn’t know what my college steps were going to be-- but I decided I would mail it to someone’s house from my church family, and I’ll never forget reading my letter, getting that \$5, my freshman year of college. Seeing how much I was struggling and yet how through the help of so many and me just taking one step at a time-- that good did come, that hope was on the way. Of course there was still struggle, but the joy and hope that gave me was irreplaceable and so during the next song you’re invited to do the same. If you’re here in person, people will be coming around with paper, envelopes, pens, and hymnals. Take one of each and write yourself a note for 6 months from now-- what do you need to hear? Place your note in the

envelope and address it and then place it on the table next to the offering box on your way out. If you're at home, write yourself a note and bring it up or mail it to the church. Add a sticky note or another slip of paper inside the envelope that says, please return in 6 months and our team will take it from there.

Church, we are being invited to walk towards an abundant future for our communities and ourselves-- it is God's dream for the world to know this abundance. As you continue to dream big in your own life-- I ask you to look for the places where your dreams connect to that of God's; how your own hopes and longings connect to God's hope for love and life for all the world. And as we continue in worship and you think about what to say to your 6 months from now self, I call you to continue as so many of us prayed in our communion liturgy last week-- continue to walk bravely, continue to show up with hearts of love and justice, continue to show up in this world, continue to be a part of making it a more just and loving place with each step you take-- and I promise in doing so you'll get closer and closer to not only your dream, but God's. Amen.