

*'Don't Think Too Highly of Yourself, But Use Sound Judgement'* based on Romans 12  
Delivered at 5 p.m. Sunday, August 30, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

The week before last, Claire and I were able to take the kids on a mini-vacation. We didn't go far, but we hit some nearby places, all outdoor attractions where we could both safely keep our social distance, and also give the kids a special experience or even a special memory. For Claire and I, we were happy to have a change, something to break up everyday life for the past 6 months.

We went to the Cape May Zoo, and this was my first time there. It was great. Then the next day, we went over to Longwood Gardens in Chester, PA. Beautiful. Then we went up to Princeton to stay at a friend's house, while he and his wife and son were up in Cape Cod. We used their house as kind of a free Air B & B house, and from there went to the Drive Through Safari, over at Six Flags in Jackson NJ.

It was an unusual feeling to be out and about again, really for the first time as a family. Aside from blueberry picking and going to the beach, these were the first real family outings that we have made since March. I'm grateful that you all gave me the time off, as it was very much needed, and very much appreciated. The COVID-19 pandemic has really changed our lives. And this time was a reminder of what we've missed. That's why I'm so thankful to have this opportunity to be here today with all of you, for a hybrid-service, a collection of our congregation here outside in the cemetery, while we broadcast at this special time a second service on Facebook. We are here, spread apart, outdoors, and wearing masks, yearning for a taste of what we had taken for granted, the ability to safely gather for Sunday worship.

Now, I don't know when we will be able to justify returning to worship in our building. But what I have said all along is that the building behind me is not the church. You are the church because the church is the people called out by God, to live out the reign of God in the world now and for eternity. Sunday mornings and the number of people sitting in pews, are not an accurate measure of God's Kingdom. The measure of a church in God's Kingdom, is how we bring our faith into the world. You, my friends, have not stopped being the church in these 26 weeks. No, in fact, in some ways, you have done more to be the church than you did before. You see, Sunday mornings can make us lazy – We expect to see each other. It's always easier to stay in touch with people when we are gathered, but reaching out to each other, sending cards, making calls, these things are much more meaningful than passing by, and saying hello and goodbye before and after service.

Now, I know that at the same time, we are all antsy to get 'back to normal.' Meanwhile, there are legitimate concerns that we have to weigh in times like this. How can we know what to do? What is the right decision? Well, I'm not sure that there is a right decision, so what then do we do? We start by praying, first as I've encouraged you to do so often, with our prayers of lament and frustration to God. I'd like to think that if I were God, I would not allow a pandemic to happen. I'd like to think that I would take control and heal the world right away. But for whatever reason, God does not intervene with thunderbolts, but calls on us, mere humans, to intervene and be the thunderbolts. Each of us, as unqualified as we are, here and across the globe, get to share in the work that God is doing in the world, it's flattering to be called, but it's also frustrating.

But since I am not God, and since I know that Jesus has called the church to be his body, we have

to figure out the best way to answer that call and join in God's work. Again, this starts with continuing to pray and also reading scripture. The words of Paul that I just read to you are important ones for us. In fact, the whole book of Romans is extremely important, not just because every preacher thinks they have to say it, but because the context of this letter, mirrors much of what we are going through.

You see, the book of Romans was written to a church, or maybe collection of churches, which had two very different backgrounds – Jews who saw Jesus as the Messiah, and pagans who gave up their polytheistic pluralism for the One True God. There was a natural tension here as one group is fulfilling their faith, and the other is abandoning their culture and converting. The Jews had already had a culture built around One God, while the Romans were finding something new.

So, when the Jews were banished from Rome by Emperor Claudius around 50 AD, the Roman churches became made up of only the pagan converts. So, the Roman church is now forced to start from a blank slate. Knowing that the ethnic customs are not central to their salvation, they abandon all of the eating rituals and customs, that the Jewish believers had still been keeping.

By the time Paul is writing to the churches in Rome, the banishment had ended, and the churches were again filled with Jewish believers and former pagans. This created a power struggle in the church between the returning old guard, and the new kids on the block who had kept the churches going. So, when it comes to the old customs – which are not required – the former pagans want them all to be abolished and want to force the Jews to live as Gentiles.

Why does all of this matter? Well, Paul refers to the converts as the 'strong' in the church, and refers to Jewish believers as the 'weak,' but neither is a term of endearment. You see, both are 'strong' in some respects, and both are 'weak' in others. The pagans have much to learn from the Jewish believers, because they have kept the foundation of their new faith. Meanwhile, the Jews can learn from the new believers, about finding their new expression of faith in God.

Paul tells them that they have all fallen short of the glory of God and must not judge each other. He says that both of them need to stop being engaged in a power struggle at all, stop being conformed to the world and its outward displays of might. Paul wants them to offer themselves as a living sacrifice to God, echoing Jesus's command to lay down your worldly identity, and instead, let God transform their minds, meaning their priorities.

While we were at Longwood Gardens, there was one woman we saw not wearing a mask. She seemed nice enough and at first, I thought it was just because she was distant, but when she approached us and our kids, we noticed her T-shirt read, "Faith, Not Fear." Immediately, I bristled up, wanting to defend my mask, wanting to appeal to my authority as a pastor, and how I have sound biblical reasons for wearing it. Indeed, how dare she say I lack faith?

But then I thought of Romans 12, knowing it was the recommended text for today, "Don't think too highly of yourself but use sound judgement." The truth is that I think we were both looking at each other with worldly eyes, with eyes that judged our own positions as strong in our hearts, while perhaps also feeling weak alongside the other one. I felt strong because I believe it is right to wear a mask. I felt weak because I felt she was putting me at risk. She felt strong, I assume, to not wear one, and weak since I could report her and have her kicked out. (I didn't).

The truth is that each of us were in that moment thinking too highly of ourselves. The whole 'mask' or 'no mask' debate among Christians is like the Roman church. The weak and the strong are forgetting that they both fall short of God. Not wearing a mask is not a sign that you have more faith, nor is wearing a mask a signal that you are a good person. All fall short of the glory of God, especially in a pandemic.

I find it troubling that there are church leaders saying, 'This is the ONLY faithful response,' and then lambasting the other side as being less 'Christian' or even non-believers. Like the pagan converts and Jewish believers, we must learn from each other. We must assess the situation that we are in as individual believers and assess our churches as one congregation in a greater Church. We have many parts in the one body, the true church, and every part has a different function, and as individuals, we belong to each other.

So, depending on our faith, which is the standard that God has marked out for us, we must apply our skills and gifts to meet a need that God is asking us to address. My first thought when I considered this was Donna, Minerva and others, who immediately stepped up and started making masks to give away. Leo and others have continued to meet with those in need and lend a hand. I know many of you created call lists and you send cards, while others have braved grocery stores for friends, started new hobbies to share gifts, or redirected unspent entertainment dollars, to support charities helping families hurt most by the pandemic.

This is a short list of many things that you all continue to do with what God has given you. Indeed, I think this is what Paul was talking about when he said Love must be real. We must hold on to what is good, if we are to truly dismiss what is evil. But we must be eager to show respect for one another. This is where I will come down now, in defense of wearing a mask. You see, wearing a mask, even if you do not believe they are effective, is one way to outdo one another with respect for the other person. Not wearing one when encountering people who wish you to wear it, does not make you a champion of faith, but rather ordinary.

You see, if God has blessed you to be fearless of COVID-19, the Christian response is not to boldly speak out about individual freedom, but to use that courage to help others, maybe by giving of yourself, to serve those who are afraid or at a much higher risk than you.

This is not then a free pass for those who might be afraid of the virus. The Christian response for you is not to virtue shame the unmasked, but to encourage alternative options to serving God in your life, be it through prayer, or donations whatever you can do. You must still respond to God.

The Reformer Martin Luther was steeped in the letter to the Romans, and so, when he was asked how to handle a pandemic, his response was similar. He said that he commends those who do not flee the city during a plague, but said you cannot place that burden upon everyone. He advised that if you have the ability to stay away, to make amends by supporting the care for the sick, the care for the poor and all who are in need. And for those who stay, don't just brag, but be a part of the solution.

Indeed, he says that to protect yourself and flee from all engagement is sinful, because you are neglecting to love your neighbor who cannot flee the disease. But if you stay, but do not do everything that can counteract the plague, then you are sinful because you are rash and reckless,

tempting God. To think that God does not desire the aid of science, is to limit God's ability to use the secular world for good.

Luther tells pastors that they "ought to think this way: 'Very well, by God's decree, the enemy has sent us poison and deadly offal. Therefore, I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me, and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.'"

Friends, over these last few months, your session, a regathering committee, and I have all been deliberating how, and when, we might re-open our church. We have been watching diligently as other churches have done so. We have been assessing the limits of our church facilities, and building up their strengths to prepare for that day. But the sound judgement needed to do this safely, requires a lot of discernment, as the capacity within our sanctuary of properly spaced individuals is just 25-35. We are praying for God's protection but will always take precautions. We will not force our presence where it is not needed, because technology and modern life give us the capability to do new things. We are heeding God's will in this as best we can.

We hope that you find today to be a success and pray for your safety as you gather. The session has already talked about trying to do this in September and October, provided the weather and the number of cases here both cooperate, and provided you continue to cooperate too, with any reasonable precautions that are asked. Indeed, none of us have ever led a church in a pandemic, let alone a city, a county, a state or a nation in one.

Let us not think too highly of ourselves, and consider the advice of Paul, on how to live the Christian life, in the midst of division. Outdo each other with respect, but keep working hard, fueled by the Spirit's fire. Work as servants to each other for the Lord. Celebrate your hope. Be patient in your suffering and give constant energy to prayer. Keep giving to meet each other's needs and be hospitable to strangers. Bless those who persecute you. Celebrate with those celebrating. And especially in these times, mourn with those mourning. Be at peace with all people, never taking revenge, and if someone is in need and you can help, even if it is your sworn enemy, serve them and be good to them.

Friends, it is hard enough to be up against a pandemic, we don't need to make it worse. Let us not complicate things by being up against each other, divided on trivial things. Take also the advice of Martin Luther, as it echoes the words of Paul, and I hope you will hear my words, as I confess my own struggles. But we must not let evil conquer us, by resorting to evil. We must not fight evil with evil, fight fire with fire. Rather, let us all submit to serving one another, to conquer evil with what is good. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

(Matthew 16:12-27 Pastor's Translation) Then Jesus, having come into the *district* of Caesarea Philippi, questioned his disciples, asking, "Whom do *people* say that the *Son* of Man is?" And they said, 'Well, some say *John* the Baptist, but others *Elijah*, but others *Jeremiah*, or one of the prophets." He said to them, 'But whom do you *call* me?' Then *answering*, Simon Peter said, 'You are the *Christ*, the Son of the *Living God*.' Now answering, Jesus said to him, '*Blessed* are you *Simon* son of *Jonah*! For *flesh* and *blood* has not revealed this to you, but my *Father*, who is in the heavens. But I also say to you that you are Peter and on this *rock* I will *build a home* for the *assembly* I have called, and the gates of *hell* will not prevail against it. I will give to you the keys of the *Kingdom of Heaven*, and whatever you might bind on *earth*, will be *bound* in the heavens. Whatever you untie on the earth will be untied in the heavens.' Then he instructed the disciples in *order* that they would say to no one that He is the Christ. From that *time*, Jesus *began to show* his disciples that it is necessary for him to go away to *Jerusalem*, and to suffer many things from the elders, *chief* priests and scribes, and to be killed, and on the third *day*, to be raised. And having taken Jesus aside, *Peter* began to rebuke him, saying, 'God *forbid* it for you *Lord*, this will never ever be done to you!' But having turned, *Jesus* said to Peter, 'Get behind me *Satan*! You are a stumbling *block* to me. For your thoughts are not of God's thoughts, but the thoughts of *humanity*.' Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever might *desire* to save their identity will lose it. But whoever might lose their identity on account of me will find it. For what will it profit a person, if they gain the whole world, but lose their identity? What will a person *give* as an exchange for their identity? For the Son of *Man* is about to come in the glory of his Father, with his angels, and then he will give to each according to their practices.'