



Bearing Bad News

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My niece has been engaged to be married since the early days of the pandemic. She and her fiancé delayed the wedding until this August. We'll be delighted to attend and celebrate the start of their marriage. Because the wedding will be in Idaho, it's also an excellent time to see family. Both of my parents are celebrating birthdays in their 90's this year. It will be great to see them and show off our grandchildren.

My story's not unique. This was going to be the year when we reunited, caught up, made plans...went back to normal. The availability of the COVID-19 vaccine held great promise. Because we weren't all vaccinated quickly enough, however, the virus did what viruses do: it mutated. Thankfully the vaccine remains effective against the Delta variant in preventing serious illness leading to hospitalization and death. For those who are unvaccinated, it is deadly. Unlike the original transmission of COVID-19 virus, the Delta variant is targeting younger people (no doubt, in part because of the high vaccination rates of our elderly). People in their 20's are now contracting the virus at much higher rates than other segments of the population. Hospitals are again reaching capacity, and deaths are climbing. As long as we give the virus available, unvaccinated hosts, it will continue to wreak havoc and mutate to avoid the protection of our vaccines.

But what about the wedding? Can we sneak that in -- without masks, of course, because they ruin the photos -- before things get really bad? Can I share a birthday cake with my parents? I feel this urgency to hurry up and do all of the activities that are, unfortunately, most likely to spread the virus ... like, maybe if I'm quick enough, the virus won't notice.

Our church Sessions are facing the same dilemma. Can we just meet unmasked for a few more Sundays? Can we just get through the summer picnic or the annual festival? Can we share communion together at least once before we go back to virtual worship? Can we outrun the virus?

The data is telling us what we don't want to hear: no. Cases, hospitalization, and deaths are all on the sharp rise. The Delta variant whipped through state after state. Breakthrough infections are happening in vaccinated people, though gladly with a shorter, less severe impact; however, both vaccinated and unvaccinated people are shedding the virus at equally high loads. And all the while, the virus is mutating, trying to evade our efforts to stop it.

Lisa Allgood, immunocytochemist and Executive Presbyter for Cincinnati Presbytery shared statistics she describes as "chilling" a week ago: 50% of ALL COUNTIES across the entire US are at the highest risk level for community transmission, and another 17% are at "substantial" risk; less than 9% are at low risk. She also highlighted this news item from a physician, ranking as #3 the "top 5 places not to go":

3. Avoid Churches or Places of Worship

Delta spreads quickly and these places provide the perfect situation for it to spread. Usually poorly ventilated, the danger is increased because folks speak, sing, and sometimes shout. If they are carriers of the Delta



coronavirus, you are likely going to catch it. If you catch it, you will bring the virus home with you. These gatherings are also less likely to have adequate physical separation and inadequate ventilation.

Rev. Kerri Parker, Executive Director for the Wisconsin Council Churches, has been on the front line for us since the pandemic began. Meeting with public health officials, scientists, attorneys, and doctors, she and the WCC team have created [reasonable, trusted resources](#) for congregations. Underlying all of their recommendations is a biblical grounding in our sacred command to care for the most vulnerable among us, rather than to pursue our personal wants or rights. As she shared the difficult report on COVID-19 to a group of judicatory leaders on Monday, one of her comments stuck with me, **“Now isn’t the time to be wishy-washy because people will die.”**

We don’t have the political will in this State to impose mask mandates anymore, so you and I need to be socially responsible on our own initiative. The church needs to lead the way in how we demonstrate love for the vulnerable. So, my masks will come out of the cupboard, and I will wear them in love. I will encourage everyone I know to be vaccinated. As the bearer of bad news, I will continue to urge you to enjoy outdoor worship just as long as Wisconsin’s weather will permit it, and to maximize social distancing if you need to be indoor. Thank you for keeping your virtual worship options available and your rituals touchless. You will save lives that God has called precious.