

Dear Church,

I recently told some of you in one of our small groups that watching Stephen Colbert is one of my little indulgences. I was watching an episode the other evening and he commented again (as have a lot of late night hosts who are now recording shows in their homes) how strange it is to have no audience. He tells jokes with no laughter from the front row, he offers commentary on the news of the day with no response from an eager crowd. He has repeated in the last few months how disorienting it has been in a job where you are accustomed to immediate feedback, to continue working with none.

I am no late night host, nor am I a comedian, but I have to admit...as a preacher, I feel Mr. Colbert's pain. It has been quite an adjustment for me to learn to preach to a camera. I don't get to meet any of your eyes halfway through the sermon and see if what I am saying is resonating with you. I don't get to see your nodding heads or confused looks telling me I didn't quite say something clear enough. And I don't get to hear your responses as we share in fellowship after the service. And it is not that I miss those things because I am in need of validation, though the affirmation is always appreciated. I miss those things because I believe that **preaching is the beginning of a conversation**.

Over the last several weeks, I have had occasion to preach on some "hot button" social issues including the wealth gap and disparities in the healthcare system made all the more visible by the pandemic and of course the Black Lives Matter movement in light of the deaths of Ahmaud Arberry, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. My goal in broaching these subjects from the pulpit is not to tell you how to think about them, or prescribe what a Christian response to these issues will be...I don't actually have that kind of authority. My goal is to begin and contribute to what can and should be ongoing discussions in the church about what it means to pursue Christian discipleship in our time. I don't have all the right answers, and I don't possess a monopoly on knowing where God is calling us, but I believe strongly that when we talk about these things together, when we share our thoughts and knowledge, we can learn and grow together. That also doesn't mean that we will be in total agreement. We learn little from people who think exactly like us. As the Jewish scholars teach, wisdom arises not from any one of us, but from the space between us when we sit together.

My hope is that while we are a socially distanced church, and even when we find ourselves meeting in person again, we won't shy away from big questions, and bigger discussions. Pursuing discipleship takes courage and resilience...qualities I know this community has in spades. It can be hard (and occasionally uncomfortable) work, but it is work I am glad to do with you all.

Peace be with you,

-Pastor Emily