

As much as we may not want to, honestly as much as I don't want to, I want us to travel back almost six years ago. Yup, you're all doing the math. We're traveling back to the pandemic. I think as much as all of us are tired of living consistently through unprecedeted times, it is safe to say that there was never a more unprecedeted time than Covid. For me, there are two moments that stick out from those first initial days. The first, I was sitting at a friend's house watching TV and Jennifer called, flabbergasted that the NBA had just suspended their season. The second was standing in the church office, staring at Todd Recupero, who was council president at the time and telling him that Bishop Humphrey just told us we needed to stop worshipping in person immediately. Those moments stick out in my mind like they were yesterday, but there are other moments. Moments across those interminable fourteen months that we weren't in this building that sit in my heart with crystal clear clarity.

We filled Bill Solomon's lawn with 80+ bottles of wine, plus a few cases of Cheerwine, for his 80th birthday. Bible study never lost a single step, just decided we could meet online, no problem and God bless her, Kay Scougal at 90 years old learned how to use Zoom like a pro. How could we go this long without having communion? Well, we just loaded everything outside and had drive up communion. I would give you all your little

prepackaged cups on paper plates and we would pray at a distance. We discovered you can in fact have a lock-in on Zoom. We stayed up until midnight playing Scattergories and Password and watching Alex and Kelly Murphy's bird hang out in Alex's hair. Council members, deprived of their yearly Christmas party, got drop off gifts of snacks and libations. We made back to school boxes and reverse Advent calendars for THRIVE. Sunday school was full of baking! Talk about things I never imagined doing, connecting Bible stories to a different baked good and all of us figuring it out together over our computer screens. When I finally cleared out my masks, so many of them had been lovingly made by Vivian Barnes, making sure I had one in every liturgical color and Harry Potter patter she could find. We had a Good Friday processional using a tripod and a rolling cart. It was different and I would never, ever want to do it again, *but* we did it. We made church and community and service happen even in the midst of a world turned completely upside down with grief, fear, and uncertainty. I'm pretty sure in those moments we were the definition of resilient, and as hard, as awful as it was, those few years are what have brought us here today.

I mean, honestly quite literally because any other time pre-pandemic we had cancelled church for weather, it was precisely that, cancelled. Zoom church wasn't a thing. But I also mean it metaphorically. There is

something that has moved and shifted through our community since that time, our sense of family, of community, of purpose has solidified. It was out of Covid that our chaos of passing the peace arose. It was during that time and after that I noticed more of you referring to this as your church family. We realized how precious these relationships were because we had spent so long without them. And honestly, I'm not sure without Covid that we would be here honoring and celebrating RIC Sunday because it was out of Covid that we realized we needed to figure out who we were going to be in this new world of post-Covid church. We needed to revitalize and refocus our mission to reflect the community that came out of and reformed during that time and...miraculously...here we are.

The people in our first lesson probably felt much the same way, honestly. We don't really hear much from the book of Nehemiah in the lectionary, but we find ourselves there today, with these throngs of people gathered at the Water Gate of Jerusalem to do one thing, hear the word of God. Now, y'all, I know, none of our idea's of a good time is standing for eight hours listening to someone read the Bible to us, *but* we have to remember what these people have been through. This is the generation of Israelites who have returned home from Babylon. Most of them have never known, or weren't old enough to remember, worshipping in their holy city,

in God's home. They had spent generations in a far off land, uncertain how they could worship or if they were even allowed to since their deteriorated relationship with God is what got them shipped off to Babylon in the first place. Now though, now they are home and ready to be renewed and recommit to the life God has called them too. Imagine that feeling, being back in Jerusalem, surrounded by your community, finally able to do the thing you have been longing for...you would debate standing there for eight hours to bask in that feeling. And we do know that feeling, I think we get a glimpse of it every Sunday when we realize, oh, we get to do this thing together, we get to be in community together, because we didn't just survive, we thrived through the hard, we remained resilient.

It is by living through the hard and coming out on the other side that we continue to do what we do, because we know what it is to not have this, to not be connected and together. We know what it feels like to feel cut off from our relationship with God because things are weird and chaotic. We know, in so many ways, how the Israelites felt when they came back from exile, and because of that, we strive to create a space in this wild world where no one has to feel disconnected, where everyone feels safe and welcomed and beloved by God. When you have known what it feels like to *not* have that, it becomes vital, an essential part of your being to make sure

that no one else feels that way and that is why things like RIC are not just important but necessary. It helps us to acknowledge that yes, we have beloved siblings who feel cut off, disconnected, unloved, particularly from God and from faith communities. It helps to us to acknowledge the role we have played in those feelings, and it helps us to create spaces that seek to remedy some of that pain, to say, here you are welcome, you are seen, you are heard, you are a part of who we are. It helps us to say recognize resilience in one another, because we have been there too.

We all know in some way, shape, or form what it feels like to not feel whole, to not feel welcomed, to not feel seen, to be uncertain of your place in a community. You might have felt it those first few times coming back after Covid or coming here for the first time, and yet, the steadfast, resilient love of God is what keeps us coming back, what continues to pull us into the future. When you have felt that kind of love and strength, you want everyone to feel it, and so we keep fighting, we keep striving, in the midst of the hard, in the midst of the exhausting, in the midst of the frustrating. We keep showing up, we keep standing up for what we believe in and for what our siblings in Christ need. We continue to be resilient because Christ is continually and perpetually resilient for us. Luther once said, when faced with one of, if not the, hardest moment of his life, “Here I stand, I can do no

other.” And 500+ years later, here we stand doing the same thing, rooted and grounded in love and community so that all may know that they are seen, that they are beloved, that they are welcome. **AMEN!!!**