



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Let the Church Bells Ring!”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Matthew 12: 1-8; Luke 13: 10-17

April 19, 2020

Before I start, I want to mention that I think it ought to be recorded, in the annals of history of North Shore Congregational Church, that on March 8, 2020, our Health Committee hosted a special luncheon and presentation on the inevitability of change – and we haven’t gathered in this building for worship ever since! I am seriously considering asking our church council for veto power over whatever programs the Health Committee selects in the future.

On a more serious note, I received an email from one of our members about three or four weeks ago, in which she shared the blessing of the church bells that she had been hearing from her home down the street. In her note, she spoke of how the world was a little quieter than it usually is, and that every hour, throughout each day, she could continue to hear the peace of our bell carillon ringing through the disruption that surrounds these days. After receiving that note, I’ve noticed many times the number of people stopping outside of our church while out for a walk. They pull out their phones, they take pictures, they record or FaceTime with other people, and they are stopping to take in the sound of those bells that continue to ring out in the midst of all that we’re facing today. It’s been a striking image for me - to imagine, and a few times to witness, the ways in which those bells continue to breathe hope, peace, and love into lives that are so burdened and overwhelmed by the changes and worries we’ve known these past weeks. It is audible reflection of what has transpired in very real ways in our fellowship over the last 6 weeks.

Seemingly overnight, everything began to change. It’s really somewhat mind-blowing to consider the transformation we have been through over the course of the last month and a half. There have been unimaginable shifts in how we work, how we relax, how we socialize, how we educate, how we shop...the list goes on, and it has been the very same here at the church.

- This is eighth worship service held in this remote fashion.
- We’ve shifted to Bible studies to Zoom that have long-standing and new participants joining in from near and far.
- We have daily devotionals on Facebook with a regular audience that stems from Texas to New York.

- Julie has been doing Sunday school lessons for the kids on Facebook and teaching confirmation on Zoom.
- Our youth are meeting in the same way.
- Our worship services have regular participants from across the country and beyond.

And all of this is in addition to the continuation of care through food drives, bag lunches, meal trains for members, card and note exchanges between our children and some of our older members, volunteers making phone calls to check in on some of our more isolated members, the list goes on... But, the point is that, in the midst of an everchanging circumstance filled with angst, worry and fear – the church bells continued to ring in profound ways, both literal and figurative!

It has all been part of our ‘Being Church’ initiative that we launched the moment all of this began. As the trajectory of social distancing became clear, and we knew that our physical separation was going to last a while, the first thing we did was lean into that circumstance, as forcefully as we could, and spawned this initiative in which we would creatively find ways to continue to be the Church in the face of the ever changing circumstances around us. Teams met. Volunteers jumped in. Kids started drawing. Members started writing and calling. I could go on and on with the magnificent cornucopia of ways in which people have stepped in to become a part of the church continuing to be the church in new and profound ways. What I really think commands our attention in the face of all of this however, is the fact that the bells keep ringing...the ministries continue...the Church lives on.

As we gather on this Sunday after Easter, my mind is drawn back to the circumstance of those disciples, those closest to Jesus, in those days after his death and resurrection. You just know that they were all looking at one another somewhat lost, somewhat confused, wondering what it is that would come next. They had devoted the recent years of their lives to following Jesus. They had walked with him, learned from him, ministered with him, served him, and now he wasn't there. Where do they go from here? What happens next? How do they continue to serve, when the one they served is no longer with them? Now we know, of course, that Jesus is very much with them. We know of the ongoing promise of his presence. We know that he never leaves them, and that he never leaves us. But still, they were in that place much as we have found ourselves in these recent weeks - suddenly confronted by a fundamental shift in how it is we walk with Jesus, and suddenly redefining, seemingly overnight, what it means to be a disciple and follower of Christ. And that, my friends, is where we come face to face with these stories of Jesus healing and ministering on the Sabbath.

The gospels have a few of these stories of Jesus doing some sort of work or another on the Sabbath, that raises the ire of the Jewish establishment. In some he does acts of healing. In others he does acts of sustaining himself and his disciples. But, there is a recurrent narrative of Jesus doing something on the Sabbath, and then being challenged by the leaders of the Jewish tradition, about that which he's done. Now, I really don't want to go neck deep into my understanding of the conflict between the legalistic adherence to the Law and Jesus' re framing of the understanding of the Law as a whole. I should note for today, however, that the original purpose for the law, as handed down from God to Moses, was to help point the people of Israel toward God. It was meant to be a map of devotion that guided Israel to a deeper and more life-

giving relationship with God. By the time of Jesus' ministry, however, laws had been written on top of laws, on top of other laws, to clarify even other laws, and the goal of using the law to grow closer to God had been replaced by an adherence to the law itself as the goal of faithfulness.

That's the context of the story that we see play out in Matthew 12, as Jesus picks grain with his disciples on the Sabbath. And it's a different though similar story in Luke 13, where Jesus heals that crippled woman and is challenged by the Jewish leadership. In pretty much all of these Sabbath stories, however, the underlying theory of Jesus' answer is the same. Whether it is from picking grain, or healing, Jesus responds by turning the question back to the elders and saying, 'Is this what the Sabbath, and the Law, is all about? Are you really going to stick to the letter of the Law instead of serving the need in front of you? Are you really going to put your code of behavior above the heart of God? Is your commitment to tradition, to what you know and find comfortable, going to trump your response to the suffering you face?' In each of these cases, Jesus places the adherence to the tradition and the practices of old against the response to the need in the moment. And in each case, the teaching of Jesus is that responding to the need of the moment, is always the act that is closer to the heart of God.

I have made the comment, a few times over the course of the past month, that in my entire life in the Church I have never seen the Church (not just ours, but the greater Church as a whole), react and change to a circumstance in the ways in which we have been forced to change in recent weeks. Changes that were literally made overnight are things that would have taken months, and in many cases years, to unfold in the 'normal' life of the church – and those very changes are opening up doors to new ways of ministry and connection that we never imagined 6 weeks ago. The church has continued to be the church, because we made that Sabbath choice of Jesus. The bells have continued to ring because we put the need in front of us ahead of the traditions and practices that restrain us, and the result has been periodically tiring, momentarily overwhelming, and yet constantly energizing and inspiring. The question that we will soon need to ask, however, is what comes next!

Not yet, but someday hopefully soon, we will gather back in this room together. Bible studies will once again come together in Friendship Lounge, the Hangout will reconvene at the home of Abby and Nick, we will have worship together in this room and share wonderful meals downstairs provided by our Fellowship Committee. Not yet, but someday hopefully soon, we will gather back in this room together and our lives are going to return to those over-calendared races that we call our daily living. And when that happens, we are going to face a choice. Do we return to things as normal? Do we reset the calendar of our lives and the ministries of the church all right back to everything they were before all this began? Or, do we reclaim those treasured parts that we've been missing, while we find room to integrate some of these new ways of being church, of being disciples, of being neighbors, that have opened to us tremendous doors in ways we've never before imagined.

As individuals, as families, as communities, as a church, we have all found ways to meet the needs in front of us with remarkable ingenuity, profound love, and heartfelt compassion. And, for a bit longer, we will continue on this road of uncharted waters, responding to all of those needs in our new and unusual ways. Over time, however, that's going to change and we are slowly going to return to a culture closer to that which used to be. And, I have to admit that my

deepest longing, my most heartfelt prayer, is that when things get back to normal, we don't. There are many things we've done as individuals and as a church, for many years, that I can't wait for us to reclaim. There are some tremendous blessings, however, in the changes into which we've been forced in the last month and a half. It is my heartfelt prayer, that as individuals and as a church, we can reclaim those treasured patterns of old, grab hold of the blessing of that which is new, and continue to constantly grow and evolve in the manner in which we respond to the needs that are before us.