



Coronavirus Update: 25 August 2020

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ at St. John's,

Below please find a brief devotion, "O Thou who changest not..." along with some important words on what's required of our congregation based upon the new Shawnee County health order that came out on Monday. Please read this communication in its entirety. Spoiler alert on the order: *nothing needs to change at St. John's at this time. We look forward to seeing everyone this coming Sunday!*

O Thou who changest not...

Do you remember the line of "Abide with Me" that precedes the words that title this little piece? The hymn says, "Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou who changest not, abide with me!"

Far from being merely a comforting thought, the hymn correctly confesses the truth of the Holy Scriptures. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb 13:8). The inspired psalmist writes, "From everlasting to everlasting, You are God" (Ps 90:2). And many other Scriptures testify to this truth. The comfort of the sentiment of the hymn is comforting only because it's true.

What a comfort it is, then, to us who live in the midst of such change right now. Change is confusing. Change "throws us off our game." Change seems to *belie* the very truth of Scripture and it makes us ask, If everything else changes, what about God?

Consider just one—albeit an important one—aspect of life of late. Since March we've had at least 5 different "modes" of gathering together. First we had to reduce to 50; not long after, we had to reduce to 10. Then we were able to have 15. Of late we've been at 45. Some of those services ran simultaneously, and if the preacher in each space didn't have exactly the same length sermon as his counterpart, either nave or courtyard seemed to echo back what had been sung or played in the other space just before. Change. Change. Change.

But consider what *never* changed. God's promises for the sake of Christ never changed: He counts the world justified for the sake of the blood of His Son. The once-for-all sacrifice has already been made. As little as you can "undo" Caesar crossing the Rubicon or D-Day, so little can you undo Christ's all-availing sacrifice for sin. That means: Your sins are forgiven. That has not changed!

Not only can Christ's death and resurrection not be undone, neither can His ordinances, His institutions: He can't and frankly doesn't want to swallow back into His mouth those words, "Make disciples of all

nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” And so Christ through His church continues to make disciples by baptizing. By God’s grace, four lost and condemned sinners have in our congregation received the water of life since COVID started. Nor has the Lord separated His Word from the common elements of bread and wine, either, and since the onset of COVID in our congregation God’s faithful people have continuously been able to receive His Body and Blood for the forgiveness of their sins (I’d love to give you an exact count on this, but I low-ball it at 3,750 communions since COVID began). And He hasn’t snatched His Word out of His prophets’ mouths, either, and by His grace He continues to say on the lips of our pastors, “I forgive you all your sins,” and through the proclamation of His Word to bring His Law to bear on His Christians’ lives and above all the sweet Gospel. (Again, spitballing it on the low end when we factor in non-communicants, that’s roughly 4,500 sets of ears the gracious Word of the Gospel has struck). You see, the fact is, as soon as we’ve uttered the prayer, “O Thou who changest not abide with me,” we realize that it has already been answered—even in the midst of *so much change*. Praise and thanks be to God alone!

Prayer: O Lord, from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. You do not change, but are ever graciously minded toward me for the sake of Your Son Jesus Christ. According to your promise, continue to abide with me through Your Holy Word and blessed Sacraments. Give to me that hunger and thirst for the righteousness that I, poor sinner, do not have, and draw me to where You’ve promised to meet me, in the gathering of Your saints around Your Means of Grace. Bless all in our congregation, that they, too, may be drawn with me to Your house. Be with those who are unable due to health or living circumstances to gather with us around altar, font, and pulpit, and cause me to remember them always before the throne of Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.

A Word on the Shawnee County Health Order

On Monday, 24 August, the Shawnee County Health Department, with the concurrence of the county commission, issued a new health order. You can read the entire order [here](#). We write this to dispel some popular misconceptions about this order and to state that *the new order causes no material change to our present and planned gatherings in the Divine Service and in Sunday School and Bible studies*.

The media have largely portrayed this order as containing virtually one clause only: a restriction on indoor “mass gatherings” of more than 25 (Order, p. 2). While it is true that the order does contain such a restriction, there are further clarifications in the order that help understand what this means.

A mass gathering as defined by the order is a gathering of people in which they are not engaged in social distancing for more than 10 minutes (for the 10-minute proviso I refer you to the press conference recording [here](#)). Social distancing is the maintenance of a 6’ space between members of one household and anyone from another. So to give you an example, if we stuffed 24 people into our narthex and kept them there for 15 minutes, that would be a mass gathering by the definition of this order. If we had 26 people in that narthex gathering, we’d be in violation of the order—unless somehow family groupings could establish and maintain a 6’ distance from each other never violating that distance for more than 10 minutes.

The stipulation of the order that applies to St. John’s can be found on p. 4 of the order under “Mass events open to the public.” According to that stipulation, no more than 500 people or 50% capacity, whichever is less, can gather in an indoor space *provided they have social distancing*. Let’s do the math on our nave. We have a capacity of 406. According to this order, if we could maintain a 6’ distance between every household grouping in the nave, we could have up to 203 people in church.

Of course, we can't have 203 people with 6' social distancing. It's just impossible in that space. However, our present limit of 45 both in the nave and in the courtyard does, in fact, maintain the 6' social distancing, and our plan on 6 September to begin holding Divine Service in the nave for 72 faithful at a time also adequately provides for the social distancing required not only by law but for the health of everyone present.

The order also presents no material changes for our planned re-launch of Bible studies and Sunday School. We have our teacher installation on Sunday, 6 September, at 10:00 a.m. in Luther Hall, and, God-willing, we'll continue to be able to hold our Bible classes and Sunday School throughout this academic year.

The mask order, of course, remains in place, and even as we appreciate the inconvenience of mask wearing (we pastors get to wear them for 4.5 hours in a row!), we ask congregants to continue, as they have done so well, to obey the governing authorities ([Rom 13](#)) and to have concern for the wellbeing of their brothers and sisters in Christ ([Gal 6:10](#)). I might mention, as well, that the press conference referred to above made a point of saying that one place health officials are finding difficulties is when people are leaving a venue, so we simply remind you to do what you can to maintain social distancing as you come to church and leave, even as we've done inside.

May the good and gracious Lord continue to uphold each and every one of us by His grace for the sake of His Son, our Lord!