

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

This morning, I was reading an opinion article in the La Crosse Tribune (May 13, 2020, p. A6) entitled, "Here's why faith is growing." The author, Cynthia M. Allen, wrote about the current Coronavirus Pandemic and offered examples to support this statement (headline). She initially posits that perhaps people will fall away from attending church, "at first for safety, but eventually because they've simply lost the habit." She further posits that if one considers the effects of the virus, "the almost universal suffering and despair...circumstances seem ripe for a great falling away from faithfulness altogether. Yet, the opposite appears to be true."

As a pastor, I was heartened to hear this news! We have been apart for almost 2 months, and the ease of reading a sermon at home or watching online services, has made me wonder what the future will hold. But, I too believe that we are people who live in community, and that many (most) of us are looking forward to returning to in-person worship. We are people who enjoy sharing our faith with others in the body of Christ. This is one reason why the apostles' established churches. We need community in order to be challenged to reason and think beyond our own limited perspectives. If we do not challenge our thinking, we can easily become complacent; reading only what we want and only what aligns with our personal philosophy of life.

Ms. Allen continues in her article by providing statistics from a recent Pew Research Center survey to support "why faith is growing." "[O]ne-quarter of U.S. adults (24%) say their faith has become stronger because of the coronavirus pandemic. Notably, that's 24% of U.S. adults overall -- not just those who identified as being very religious before this all began."

But what about the others? What are the statistics saying about them? Ms. Allen states, "[W]hile about half of Americans say their faith hasn't changed much in the face of the global pandemic, only 2% in the Pew study say it has become weaker. Gallup [Poll] had a similar result, at 3%."

She suggests that the pandemic has left

us all to contemplate our role in the world and the purpose of our existence.

Perhaps that's part of the reason why 11% of adults who seldom or never attend religious services have found their faith is increasing in the wake of COVID-19; and why 7% of religiously unaffiliated Americans-included atheists and agnostics-now similarly find themselves drawn to faith.

As an educator, I have often used the developmental model commonly referred to as "Challenge and Support." All education is based on the model that in order to grow we must at times be challenged, and at other times, supported. If all that we read keeps us in our comfort zone, we do not grow in our understanding of God, God's word, God's forgiveness and God's grace.

Please know that I am not suggesting that God is using this pandemic as a sign of God's wrath.

Rather, we may see this time as an opportunity to draw closer to God. May we look through our eyes at a world that is not "ripe for a great falling away from faithfulness altogether," but ripe for a great return to faith. May we look at our lives with the realization that our faith, and the faith of others, can grow during this challenging time. May God strengthen us for the journey, as we grow in faith and love for God and one another.

Blessings and peace,

Pastor Cathy