

Below is an updated version of a brief meditation Father Richard Rohr—one of our great modern theologians --offered to his staff shortly after the pandemic began this past March. He called it: *What the Pandemic Is Saying to the World*.

Listen to it. In fact, sit back, relax in your chair, or couch or floor and close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Let it out. And just listen:

*Humanity, you are all One.
You are one beloved community,
and you are one global sickness.
You are all contagious—and always have been,
unconsciously infecting and yet able to also bless one another.*

*There are no **higher** and **lower** in this world.
There is no **smart** or **stupid**; no **totally right** or **totally wrong**.
The only meaningful division is between those who serve
and those who allow themselves to be served.
All the rest is temporary posturing.*

*Many to whom you look for power and leadership
have shown themselves to have empty hands, minds, and hearts.
We are bereft of all satisfying explanations,
all ledgers of deserving and undeserving.
There are no perfect answers or absolute heroes.
We all wear a mask to protect the other from “me.”*

*Don't play the victim!
Victimhood is always a waste of time—God's time and yours.
Instead, try to learn the important lessons.
We are all in the same elementary school now.
Here, we must learn to stand in two different places
and to change places often.
The served must also be the servants,
and the servants must also be the served.*

*Just stay in the eternal circle of the Suffering and the Servants.
Christians call it the Body of Christ.
We are not the first or the last generation
that gets to suffer and to serve on this earth.*

We all want to be back in church. I do, you do. We want things to go back to the way things always were. We want it so badly sometimes that we take risks and say we don't care any more- even though we do. We just want things back.

Medical professionals are worried. They see this "pandemic fatigue" and they are worried. Worried that we haven't even *seen* the worse yet.

Some call these medical professionals --who have studied epidemics and pathogens—doomsayers, or worse—charlatans.

Why? Because they don't want to have to bear their isolation, their need for solace, their grief—any longer.

I get it. I'm sure you do, too.

But we have just two jobs—given to us by God—in this world. To love God, and to love each other. Or—as Rohr puts it: to be servants and to serve.

The whole Gospel reading today encapsulates what Jesus himself thought most important. Now, here's a big bible—full of stories of faith—but he sums up its gist: Love. Love God. Love others.

I love you all. I hope you know that. I really do. And I don't want to lose any of you. Not one.

So my love manifests by bringing you as many opportunities to love God as I can: Sunday worship, Noonday Prayer, Compline, Classes about God, time alone with God in private prayer....

But the vestry, task force and I have not opened the church yet for in person worship. Some of you would not have made that decision, I know. But I'm here to think about what's best for our whole community. I don't want to

have to live with myself if any of you get sick, or, God forbid, die—alone--because that's what happens when you die from Covid—you die without those you love surrounding you.

If that happened to any one of you--I just couldn't bear it.

And so -- all of us—yes—even me—are grieving now. But the pandemic, and our grief, will not go on forever. And we are not the first Christians to suffer privation.

But I have heard many ask- "Where is God in this? Why is the Spirit making us endure this pain?" I've even asked that question myself.

Even before the pandemic I heard people lament the fact that many people were leaving the church. They wondered what would be left - what would become of the church?

Yesterday, a deacon I know who has suffered a great deal lately, shared this thought: "Have no fear. Many may leave - some temporarily, some permanently. But what will be left is a core of deeply spiritual people - people truly connected to God. They will be the seed from which will grow a whole new church. Be ready! Be open! For it may be a very different church from what we have known and loved. Hold on to God and let God lead you. If you hold too tightly to what has been, you will not be prepared for what God is bringing."

Wise words.

Today we are celebrating our Heritage Sunday—it's St. Thomas' church's birthday. Elizabeth has scoured our archives for pictures from our past—and it's meet and right to do so.

But. I'm struck by how much we have learned and accomplished this past year. God is indeed leading us.

- We have learned how to livestream on Facebook bringing over a hundred people a week ongoing weekday prayer and time set aside to remember whose we are, and what we're all about.
- We continued our work with the Food Pantry & Loaves and Fishes—helping many of the Midcoast's most vulnerable.
- We've learned how to work as a team to produce videos for Sunday each week, creating community in new ways—ways we never could have imagined a year ago. We've reached people that for years have been homebound --giving them new hope along with views of their friends, and the ability to finally worship again as part of our community.
- Classes continue online—attracting not only our usual parishioners, but old friends who have moved away, guests from all over the United States and beyond—along with newcomers who are watching what we are doing virtually very carefully , and deciding whether or not to join us in person later.

And that's only the beginning. Wait until you see what's coming next.

Why are we doing all this? Because of love of God, and love of our neighbors.

I am so proud of this community. The Pandemic, Suffering, Heritage Sunday- are making us stronger than ever. We will indeed be the seeds of a new Church.

Amen!