

The Latest Mandate

Sometimes, between putting together the worship bulletin and Sunday morning, it dawned on a me that there is a disconnect between where the bulletin is taking us and what I should address, based on current circumstances. This is one of those times. And so, as important as these particular readings are, I did a “180” late in the week and decided to address more directly the moment we are in with this latest masking mandate. And so, I hope you will indulge the fact that I will not directly engage these scriptures

The past few months have been a tremendous relief for me and I’m guessing for you, in the sense that we have started settling back into familiar ways of being together as a church. There has been a relaxing of the masking and it started to look as though the pandemic was finally over.

But it has lingered. And now with appearance of the delta variant, renewed masking mandates are going into effect everywhere and, this past week, a new masking order was mandated for us by the Montague Selectboard.

I suppose that most of us suspected that a new mask mandate might be coming, since they have been popping up elsewhere. But I think we were all hoping that we might somehow get a pass. So when it came, it was a bit of a blow. When you first think about it, it doesn't sound so bad. Ok. We can mask for a while longer. But when you think about it a little more, then it becomes a real imposition, especially if it goes on for too long, especially when it comes to singing.

Advent and Christmas are coming with the birth of the Christ child. How can we truly celebrate these essential moments in the sacred round of the year with a choir that can't sing unmasked indoors? Or can we? We will have to figure something out.

So what are our options? One of the things that I think we all feel tempted to do, is ignore or only partially comply with the mandate. I think that this is a slippery slope that I'd like to explore briefly with you.

Trust in our Institutions

One of the things that has been steadily eroding in our society is overall trust in the institutions we rely on to regulate and ensure the health and well-being of our communities. And given that the people who run

these institutions are human and make innocent and sometimes not so innocent mistakes, I think a healthy skepticism is always a good thing. But lately it seems that we are going this, to a place where many are actively opposing, vilifying and ignoring the very organizations that were instituted to protect us.

This is a very difficult thing for me to witness, because I grew up with a high level of trust in the adults around me and in the institutions that have supported my life. I have always believed that most people have good intentions and are trying to do what is best for themselves and for society as a whole. And by and large, I feel that my trust has been rewarded, because I have been treated very well by these institutions and by the people I have encountered in them.

And so, whether it is true or not, I believe that most churches and civic organisations, government agencies like the CDC, most businesses, schools and private individuals. And whether they get their policies right or not, I believe that they are motivated by good intentions and need to be trusted, unless proven otherwise. And this goes for the Montague Select Board, whom I have never met and know nothing about.

I don't think there is any alternative to this. If we are incapable of trusting others or become unworthy of their trust, then I think that our social order will collapse and with it will go the good life that we have enjoyed. And in order for trust to exist, we have to feel as though we are all playing by the same rule book.

The Stop Light

Several years ago, when I was in Japan, I saw a group of pedestrians standing at a stop light waiting for the walk sign to turn green. There was not a car in sight and yet they were patiently waiting for the walk sign before crossing. I thought to myself that this would not happen in most places back in the US. In our country, if there are no cars to be seen, many pedestrians will simply walk across the road, regardless of whether the light is red or green.

I think that our basic reasoning is that the light is there to protect us when cars are around. So, if there are no cars around, there is no reason to obey the light. It makes no sense, from this point of view, to stand around waiting for the light to change on an empty street.

And so, I think we in this country feel as though we have a greater license to interpret and even break the rules, depending on our own reading of the situation. Rules should exist for our benefit, and we

should not have to obey them when doing so serves no other purpose than to inconvenience us.

Peer Pressure

To my mind, our tendency to play more loosely with the rules is something that is also partly caused by peer pressure. If you are waiting for the pedestrian sign to turn green with no cars around, you may feel that folks are looking at you as though you are nuts and you may feel tempted to cross, just to show that you are not nuts.

But if you do cross, then what message are you sending, perhaps to a little kid who is watching, about your relationship with the rules we are all supposed to live by.

Or take for example when you are driving on the highway. It doesn't take long to discover that almost nobody is going the speed limit. In fact, other drivers around you will start tailgating you and may even get angry with you for following the speed limit and slowing everybody down, because they see the actual speed limit as being 10 miles over the legal speed limit. It is almost like an unwritten rule that even the police seem to go along with. When you think about it, we have a rather strange relationship with the law.

A Spectrum of Views

I think that most people fall somewhere along the spectrum between obeying all rules and regulations to the letter (no matter what the situation is) and seeing rules as guidelines that you only need to follow, if they actually make sense in the situation they are in. And both of these views defend something that is essential.

In Japanese culture, people who wait for the walk sign to turn green, even when there are no cars around are, as I see it, making a point. They are reinforcing the rules that govern their orderly society, by following them, even when it is very clear that the rules are providing no benefit to anyone. And I think that this fosters a sense of trust, because you know you can trust people who play by the established rules in all circumstances.

On the other hand, I think that people who cross the street, in defiance of a red walk sign are defending the freedom to put human interest ahead of rules, when rules impede those interests or even become destructive as they sometimes do. But the cost of this is a breach of trust. When people begin to put their own judgment ahead of the established rules, we are not on the same page anymore and we cannot trust others to behave reliably.

My Personal Take

So here is my personal take on the situation we are in with this latest mask mandate. My personal view is that the mandate we are being asked to adhere to now seems overly cautious for our circumstances. It is simply a reality, and always will be, that every time we are in public, we encounter some level of risk. And when the risk that we will transmit disease to others reaches an acceptably low level, I think it should be up to us to decide what risks we are willing to take.

We have been through a very difficult time with this pandemic. Along with many others, we grieve the suffering that it has caused and is still causing. We have dutifully obeyed the law and gone through doing virtual worship and social distancing, as I think we should. And as much as we tried to provide meaningful worship to people at home through modern technology this past winter, it is a poor and inadequate substitute for in-person worship.

I wonder now, what the drain will be to our fellowship, if yet again, we have to conform to regulations that hamstring our efforts to return to full-throated in-person worship, especially as we approach Advent and Christmas. How can we do justice to the birth of Christ at Christmas if, for example, our choir that has to be masked indoors?

It seems to me that the mandate is pretty much a one size fits all pronouncement, that doesn't really take into account individual situations like ours. And to be fair to those who make these decisions, I doubt that they have the time or the capacity to carve out little exceptions for each part of their constituency. And mandates, in order to be effective, need to be as simple as possible, so that people can understand them.

Still, I feel a bit like we are pedestrians who are obligated to wait for the walk light to turn green, even though there are hardly any cars around.

So during this past week we started to explore whether there is any "wiggle room" for singing unmasked. As you can see, I am taking off my mask to preach. And if, as a congregation, we were to agree that the choir could unmask for the purpose of singing the anthem, and then remask afterwards, perhaps that would constitute an acceptably low risk and a reasonable license to take with the mandate.

After all, people are still allowed to unmask to eat indoors in public venues. And I would argue that, for us, especially as we approach

Christmas, music is an essential form of spiritual food that is every bit as important to us as the the material food we eat.

Our Dilemma

I think you can see here that I am starting to play footsie with stepping off the curb and crossing the street while our walk sign is red. And if we were a bunch of pedestrians at a long cross walk, I'm guessing that some of you would say "come on, let's just cross" and others of you would stubbornly wait for as long as it took for the light to turn green, even if there were no cars coming.

But the difference between us and a gathering of individual pedestrians is that, as a congregation we need to respond to this moment as a unity and we need to do it in a way that is consistent with the Gospel we proclaim. And, because we are the church, we have a special obligation to set an example of appropriate behavior for the community.

What can we do?

The way I see it, we have several options. We can comply fully with the mandate and do our best to fulfill our mission by adapting creatively or we can defy or partially defy the mandate.

Since the mandate was made effective immediately upon, we haven't really had much time to respond and we have done what we needed to do. We are complying. And we need to comply fully until and unless, we receive an appropriate signal from all of you in the congregation that we should do otherwise.

There is an honored tradition of civil disobedience in our country, in which Christians have chosen to disobey unjust laws, so defiance is not always out of the question. But I think that for us to do so, it would have to at least meet the test of whether we are being asked to do something that is truly unjust.

My View

At the same time, I feel very strongly that trust is built on a commitment to play by the same rulebook, even if that sometimes means "taking one for the team." And even though we may suffer some hardships in abiding by the mandate, I feel that we will be sending a message to the larger community that we are a trustworthy and law-abiding community of faith and that we share the commitment of the larger community to doing whatever is necessary to put this pandemic behind us.

Conclusion

So why, you may ask, am I speaking to you this morning of all of this. Firstly to emphasize that I think that we must be on the same page and have a unified response. And secondly, this sermon has been my own attempt to make sense of this latest twist in this never ending Covid roller coaster. It's what I am thinking about. And in the good congregational fashion, I am laying both my thoughts and uncertainties before you, so that together we can pray on this situation, and so that God may inspire us to do the right thing and make of this some form of blessing.