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To the Members and Friends of Union Congregational Church:

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘We shall live as the Lord wishes ...’” – James 4:13-15

This past week, the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ recommended that all member churches continue to suspend in person worship throughout the entire month of May. The extension of stay-at-home orders from the governor’s office, as well as public health data indicate that, in order to continue safeguarding the health and well-being of our community, we must once again extend Union’s suspension of in-person activities. Discerning when precisely we will be able to resume in-person gatherings will take a good deal of prayerful consideration. Fortunately, the SNEUCC conference has provided some guidance on this front as well. Our church leaders will be considering these matters in the coming weeks, using these guides:

SNEUCC: “Re-Opening Step by Step” <https://www.sneucc.org/re-opening>.

WCC: “Returning to Church” <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>

If you are growing tired of reading these letters, believe me: I am growing weary of writing them. This Sunday will mark our seventh week without gathering in person in the sanctuary on Rhoades Avenue. I know that I am not alone in missing the spiritual lift that comes with being together on Sunday mornings: singing songs and praying prayers, greeting one another with signs of peace, and sharing in the sacraments. On my more faithful days, I remember that this is a *fast*, an intentional, faithful giving up of something that gives us joy, in service of a deeper and richer ideal. 7 weeks is just over 40 days, the traditional length of a fast...and yet our time in the wilderness of the coronavirus pandemic is, unfortunately, far from over.

When we do not know what tomorrow will bring, all that is left for us is to live as the Lord wishes. In this pandemic, that means staying home, abiding by the practices of social distancing, caring for our neighbors, and taking the time to care for ourselves: physically, mentally, and spiritually. On some days, particularly for those working in health care or other essential jobs that require them to leave the safety of their homes, our primary focus is on simply surviving. But there are also days when we can seek ways to adapt and grow during this time as well. James does not admonish the faithful to *never* think about the future. Instead, he reminds us that when we are making plans and preparations for what comes next, we should do so trusting in the providence and grace of God to lead us. Abundant life doesn’t happen by accident; it grows only in well-tended and fertile soil.

I am heartened by all the ways members are continuing to “be the church” during this time. Our choir continues to meet via Zoom. Our committees are also conducting their work virtually. Improvements to our building have been made during its downtime. We began a new Bible Study to connect with one another through God’s Word each week. And in the coming weeks, I’ll be asking for your help to continue to enrich our online offerings, to “show face” and be a part of the online video messages that have become a crucial source of spiritual support for many among us during this time apart.

With help from you, Brothers and Sisters, Union Congregational will not just survive this time of fasting and intentional distance, but adapt and grow in the midst of it. This pandemic will not be the end for us, Friends, for with Jesus, we are promised love without end, hope without fear, and life more abundant. It is ours to have by faith: today, tomorrow, and forever.

In Grace and Peace,

Pastor Shepherd

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