

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Wednesday, May 27, 2020
Facebook Podcast Broadcast
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Recently President Trump unveiled new guidance classifying houses of worship as 'essential' and insisting that governors allow faith groups to worship despite the risk of furthering the spread of COVID-19. President Trump indicated that if governors do not allow houses of worship to open, he will "override" them.

Rather than argue about whether it is safe enough to begin worshipping in the sanctuary (this is a *scientific* argument, and the answer is 'No, it is not yet safe enough to worship in the sanctuary') and rather than argue about whether Trump has the constitutional right to "override" the governors (this is a *political* argument, and the answer is 'No, he does not have the power to override governors'), I wish to speak *theologically* on President Trump's guidance.

Herein, I make two simple points. One, gathered worship *in a sanctuary* is *not* essential. Two, as a minister who leads worship in the context of COVID-19, neither am I 'essential'. That is, I am not an essential worker.

To my first point: 'worship' does not necessarily, or even primarily, take place in the sanctuary. In fact, worship is caring for children whose parents are essential workers, which Centre Church has been doing through the

Brattleboro Centre for Children. Worship is feeding the hungry, which Centre Church has been doing through Loaves & Fishes. Worship is sponsoring the reunification of Emelio's sons with their father and grandparents. And this, Centre Church has done. Worship is contributing to Groundworks Collaborative and cooperating with Vermont Interfaith Action to alleviate homelessness, which Centre Church does through its Second Sunday offering. Worship is being in solidarity with other faith traditions and with secular agencies to ensure there is equity and diversity in our society, and we do this through our participation with the Brattleboro Area Interfaith Leaders' Alliance and Community Equity Collaborative. None of these forms of worship have stopped at all during the COVID-19 crisis. Centre Church never stopped worshipping!

According to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, worship in the Temple (the sanctuary) is often despised by God if it is contaminated by self-interest, greed, selfishness, and corruption. Dozens of scriptures testify to the fact that tainted worship is simply lived-out hypocrisy. The words of the prophet Amos are quintessential. God through Amos says: "I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream". God

condemned worship that does not respect life; I believe God does not consider worship that risks people's lives through illness to be essential. In fact, God would consider it detestable.

To the extent that genuine and safe worship is essential, we can worship privately. We can read scripture in our homes. We can pray over the phone. We can celebrate corporate worship through ZOOM, YouTube, and Facebook. We have already more than proved that worship need not be *in the sanctuary*.

Second, I am *not* 'essential'. I will say it again. I am *not* 'essential'.

It seems a strange statement for a minister to declare this to his congregation. Yet, I make it all the same. I am not being self-deprecating. Nor political. I am being honest. I am *not* essential.

I believe in the "priesthood of all believers" (I Peter 2:5-9). Those who follow Jesus the Christ have gifts and talents accorded to them by the Holy Spirit and can thus lead the community of faith. Therefore, no one, not even the minister is more important or 'essential' than any other member. We have all our respective roles in the church. The Word is delivered through song *and* sermon. So, our Music Director, Mary Milkey-May, is as much a proclaimer of the gospel as I. Just as the Sanctuary-Temple is not essential for worship, neither is the Priest-Minister.

If anyone in our church is essential, it is Kathryn Kindopp at Maplewood, it is Abi Healey at Holton, it is Dou Xi at Brattleboro Memorial Hospital, it is Ruth Tilghman at Loaves & Fishes, it is Nan Mann and the childcare staff at Brattleboro Centre for Children. I am not essential. These woman are.

At Centre Church during Lent, we studied the interface of faith and science. We learned that science enhances faith and faith enhances science. We learned that when faith and science work against one another, almost nothing good comes from it. Politics and ideology, like faith, should not undermine science. With the declaration of gathered physical worship as essential, we are seeing faith and politics undermine science. The Centre for Disease Control is experiencing unprecedented pressure and interference – its scientific warnings, directives, and recommendations are being watered-down by theocratic ideology. This does not bode well for our country nor our church.

At Centre Church, worship in the sanctuary is not essential. Worship is primarily service and justice-seeking, and we have never stopped these forms of worship. At Centre Church, I am not essential. Those on the front-lines of the pandemic are essential. And we should protect them by worshipping at home. Be well.