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May 1, 2020

Welcome to a Fireside Chat at the Hyests,

I wrote to you about fireside chats in my last message. I like it and think I will continue with that idea. So, what shall we talk about today?

It's hard to believe it is May. Sharon and I took a week's vacation to St. Augustine, FL, from February 22 to March 3 of this year. I think we closed the assemblies starting on March 4 or March 8. Whenever it was I can't remember seeing you since February 22. If we did it was on Wednesday the 4th and that is too far back, and I may be too old, to remember it. In any event it could be now as much as 68 days since we have seen most of you. That is very strange to say the least.

I don't know how all of you are coping. We are doing pretty well. Quite well if we look only at today. If we look at tomorrow and many tomorrows to come, it can be somewhat unsettling. We can expect more separation, an uncertain expectation as the country begins to open up, more uncertainty about the short, medium, and long-term effects upon the economy, and a complex set of challenges that must be considered before we resume assemblies, as well as the ever present threats to life in normal times. All of this blends together to create an unsettled life. As we live from day to day without a Covid 19 infection affecting us, sometimes it is hard to take it all seriously. As the infections level off and numbers of daily deaths decline, there will be at least a subconscious urge to go out and do things again.

On the other hand when Sharon and I go to the grocery store we wonder how safe it is out there. After the on-line service last Sunday, we went to the grocery store. With nothing much open, we were amazed at the amount of traffic around the St. Clairsville Plaza. All the intersections were backed up with vehicles. We were more amazed at how few people were wearing masks. A simple analysis of the data suggests we are a long way from the end of the threat. Nationally we seem to have peaked at 25,000 to 35,000 new cases per day from April 4 through April 30. The curve looks like a cross-cut saw blade as it bounces up and down between those two extremes, a sort of ragged plateau. We closed yesterday with another saw-tooth tip at 29,800 new cases. Ohio seems to have peaked on April 19 with 1380 new cases, followed by a precipitous drop to a low point of 362 new cases on April 27. But yesterday the new cases spiked to 724. Many of the meat packing plants across the country have experienced concentrated outbreaks of coronavirus and are shutting down to thoroughly sanitize the plants and send the workers home in an effort to break the cycle. How do we read this data? How do we assess our situation? What are we going to do going forward?

I'm no expert, but it seems to me the virus is still pretty active even with all the mitigation efforts that have been in effect for nearly two months. Now we are seeing a movement toward opening up the country again and no matter what we do and how much care we take, exposure will certainly increase and the number of infections along with it. Some argue ardently that we cannot open up with the virus so active. Too many lives are at risk and lives are more important than economics. Others argue equally ardently that we must open up because the country cannot hibernate much longer. If we do not get back to work soon, we will have an economic crisis on

our hands that will create as much or more hardship as the virus. Some states are opening faster than federal guidelines suggest. Some businesses are proceeding to open up faster than state guidelines allow. Some workers furloughed want to go back; some working want to go home. Some workers are preparing to go on strike because they are afraid of the exposure to the virus by working. Ideas are poised against ideas; strategies against strategies; leaders against leaders. And there is the ever-present disturbance caused by politicians eager to score political points over dead bodies or any other disaster and by news media who are driving a political agenda rather than reporting news. Even when they simply report news without trying to control a thought process, they sensationalize everything, as if 64,000 deaths to date were not sensational enough. And, finally, there is a significant portion of the population that simply will not exercise common sense. They are ready to resume patronizing restaurants, barbershops, beauty salons, sporting events, etc. often without regard to social distancing, wearing of masks, use of gloves, and attention to sanitation. Whenever we venture out we will be among the careless as well as the careful; among the foolish as well as the wise.

And what do we do about assemblies? From my point of view I cannot see how we can resume them for quite a while to come. And when we do, it will be a very long time before they will return completely to what we are familiar with. We might be able to require masks, but can we, or do we want to, sing through masks? Do we want to sit in every second or possibly third pew? Can we manage to keep spaced 6 feet apart in a pew? Will we sanitize the microphone after the announcer announces, the prayer prays, the song leader sings, and the speaker speaks? And how will we serve communion? Do we want to share the bread with 150 different sets of fingers breaking off a piece? I think I am okay with that... if I get to go first. I sure don't think I want to be the last person in the back pew to be served. This might be the one thing that would break the attraction to the back of the building, but social distancing is going to be tough with everyone crowding into the front. If I was still in business, I think I would explore portion-packed communion bread and grape juice to market to the churches; although I don't know what we would do with all the grape juice stains from spillage as we peel the top off the tiny communion cups.

Of course I am being a bit facetious. Please classify it as some comic relief in a truly difficult journey through uncharted waters. One thing we are able to do now remotely that we may not be able to do if we start assembling is sharing communion. We can all gather at the same time, if not in the same place, and focus on the same thing...Jesus Christ and the cross. Now, how ironic is that? That which stands at the center of our worship, communion, can be conducted remotely while it cannot while assembled. I haven't thought the communion through completely yet, but so far I haven't come up with a safe way to participate in it as a group.

This chat had little to do with encouragement and everything to do with analyzing our situation. But, before we close up the fireplace and part, a little encouragement is in order. We should remember the words of the Hebrew writer. After an extensive discourse about the superiority of Christ over the Law, and over everything else, he encourages the reader (us) by quoting from Deuteronomy 31:6, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." He continues with a reference from Psalm 27:1, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?" We might add virus to that. Either one might kill us, but nothing worse. Yes, that is still a challenge, but with the Spirit of God dwelling in us, God is ever present with us. We have to remember that

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even when alone, we are not alone. We have to reflect on the power that resides in us; that our hearts are a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. When we become disheartened, feel alone, experience fear, yearn for a return to better times which are beyond our power to achieve, remember God dwells in us. Look to Him for support.

The next time we have a chat, I want to take a close look at Psalm 23, a message written for our time. Until then,

May the Lord bless you and keep you; may His light shine upon you and give you peace.

Jim and Sharon