

*Based on Romans 5:3-5. Suffering, endurance, character, and hope.*

To mark the third anniversary of COVID shutdown, members of the congregation were invited to reflect on the following questions: *What do you lament? What have you learned? What have you let go?*

*Season Jones offered the following reflection:*

Life shutdown for me in January of 2018. A judge caused this shutdown when he decided all that mattered was for my boys to remain where they were in VA. Regardless of the care they received or the broken promises made. In less than a day, I went from spending 50% of my time with my boys to only every other weekend. Much like when Covid hit, my life suddenly looked a lot different. I cried a lot and second guessed all of my previous decisions. At times I couldn't breathe because of the pressure to try to be "Ok" to make the transition easier for my young kids.

There are only two things we are guaranteed in life, change and death, which is also a type of change. Change is hard. Even when we welcome the change, we struggle. When change is thrust upon us it often feels impossible to cope. How did I deal with this heartbreaking change in 2018? I became skilled in letting go. I let go of all the things I can't control at their dad's house. I let go of my dreams of what life would and should look like. I let go of my perceived injustices. I let go of what thought I knew. I questioned my faith because life was turning out how I thought it should.

Maybe you had to let go of things when Covid shut down the US in March of 2020. We all have ideas of how life is supposed to be and what it is supposed to look like. So many things can change life in an instant; a diagnosis, an accident, a death, a loss, a divorce or a pandemic. Letting go is a great first step and you will feel better.

If you are like me though, I tend to pick up those things I let go of. Often, I feel justified in picking it back up because of this or that reason. This causes my mind to hold on even tighter. The letting go process then becomes more like prying open a clenched fist instead of simply letting it drop. Through this experience I have found a better way. What if we were all able to let things be?

I like to imagine a little honeybee on my open palm. I can let her, and life's circumstances, be as they are. This doesn't mean that I accept anything or become a doormat. If rain started to fall, I would place my other hand over the bee to protect her until I was able to find shelter for us both. I will still fight for the things I can change but for those that I can't, I will just let them be. Sometimes I may get stung and hurt but typically it will only happen when I try to hold too tightly to the bee, and what I think should happen, instead of just letting her come and go as she pleases. This philosophy allows me to look at whatever lands on my hand, and in my life, with curiosity first, not judgement. What can I learn from this experience or person? How will this help me grow into the best Season I can be?

When Covid shut down life as we knew it, I was already well versed in letting things be. I was able to pivot fairly easy to the new way of life and look with curiosity at the many unknowns. I was able to do this because I try not to rely on my mind too much. She tends to get me into trouble. At my core I hold onto one belief and let go of the rest.

One thing I know. I am loved with an unending and mysterious love that is so much bigger and better than what we humans can show for each other. By extension I know that everyone around me is loved by this same powerful love. That includes you, no matter what. When I rest in that love, I know that no matter what happens I will be ok.

I must also be okay with not knowing. In the situation with my kids, I had so many fears and desires about what was to come. None of them have come to fruition. Sometimes when my mind likes to try to control things by knowing what will happen, I like to give it alternative outcomes to play with and distract it. For instance, I was afraid that I would lose my connection to my boys by only seeing them every other weekend. But since my time is limited with my kids, it becomes more precious. I make a concerted effort to engage with them, which is no easy feat when you are raising teenagers. We play games, go for walks and chat. Maybe the small amount of time I am given with them is creating a deeper relationship that will last into adulthood. Or maybe not. I am so much more joyful when I can keep my palm open to possibilities rather than resort to tight-fisted control of what I fear is my destiny.

The shutdowns and the unknowns of Covid didn't bother me. What bothered me the most during these past three years is the division. We had an amazing opportunity to come together as tragedy hit the world. Instead, it seemed to drive the wedge further in, widening the gap between us and them. It continues even today. As humans we want to be in control, but we aren't. The fear of not being in control is so great that we welcome any noise to distract us, even if it means turning against our neighbors. I fight against this as well. I believe I am right in how I act and what I fight for and believe in, otherwise I wouldn't do it. I don't know for sure though, and so I go back to that open palm and look with curiosity. Why does "the other" believe what they believe? Why do they act the way they do? Maybe if I experienced life as they have, I would think and act the same as them. I don't know their story, so I rest in the one thing that I do know.

I am, we are, loved.

*Our Youth offered the following reflections:*

I am exploring my passions and my self more negatively AND positively.

COVID gave me a chance to discover new hobbies and a long summer vacation.

I completely skipped the most immature period in my life, for better or worse.

It was hard at first but then there was more opportunity and growth with virtual working.

I made better friends after being away from the bad ones.

COVID made me really isolated, but because of it I know what I want to do for my life.

*Pastor Gusti offered the following reflection:*

Three years ago, our worship through the Season of Lent invited us to pray with “The God Who Suffers.” To offer our own suffering to the God who wishes to heal us; or to contemplate the suffering of others and discern God’s call for us to respond; or to consider the suffering of the climate and commit to transforming our way of life together.

Little did we know when the Season of Lent began, how resonant this theme would become, as the impact of a global pandemic swept across the earth, and eventually, across us.

For me, my greatest lament is the loss of that precious first year of relationship-building as your new pastor. When all is fresh and exciting and we are just getting to know one another. When a firm foundation of trust and love is established for the long haul.

Even as I lament that loss, however, I have learned the great strength of this congregation, the depth of your passion for the values we hold so dear, and the commitment to cultivating a legacy that will live on for generations to come. I am in awe of you.

The courage and grace of this community has helped me accept *what is* and let go of *what could have been* – or in my mind *should have been* – and to receive all of it as a gift from a generous God who truly does want all of us to be well.

The apostle Paul says it well, in his Letter to the Romans, which is our Lesson for today, and which was also one of the lectionary texts three years ago this Sunday:

*Let us boast in our sufferings,  
knowing that suffering produces endurance,  
and endurance produces character,  
and character produces hope,  
and hope does not disappoint us,  
because God’s love has been poured into our hearts  
through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*