The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, 
this mercies never come to an end; 
they are new every morning; 
great is your faithfulness. 
Lamentations 3:22-23

I have yet to meet a single person who has not been challenged by this pandemic. The reality is this pandemic is hard for everyone. That isn’t to say there haven’t been opportunities for growth or new learnings. It is to say: this is hard for everyone. Pastors, deacons, congregational leaders, teachers, nurses, hospital administrators, school boards and superintendents, government leaders, school bus drivers, CNAs, construction workers, parents, those with underlying health conditions, the homebound…the list goes on. Pandemic living has brought new challenges to all of us.

As we look to the beginning of a new school year and the start of a new program year, I want to offer you a framework for thinking. This framework is rooted in grace and a reflection on what embodied grace might look like in this time.

First, it is essential we understand pandemic living is hard for all of us. Many of us are being tasked with making decisions that feel impossible. Stress and anxiety surge as we have difficult conversations and try to navigate a way forward. This is likely true for you. Remember, it is true of the people around you too. Allow this recognition to fuel empathy and compassion.

Extend this compassion to others and yourself. This grace and compassion might come in the form of adjusted expectations. The truth is we cannot do things the way we have always done them. The best science available tells us we need to make adjustments for the sake of our health and the health of our neighbors. Some of these adjustments are small: wash your hands more often and count to twenty when you do. Some of them take more time getting used to: wear a mask in indoor public gathering spaces. Some of them feel huge, like we’re making changes and we don’t yet know the outcome: school comes to mind.

These adjustments can feel overwhelming, especially if we are more committed to the way we do something rather than the reason. Let me explain with an illustration.

In your congregation there is likely a particular way confirmation classes happen. Perhaps you meet in the youth room on Wednesday evenings for an hour with thirteen kids. The pastor teaches a lesson. Everyone eats ice cream. It is lovely. These are the ways you are used to having confirmation in your congregation. The reason you have confirmation is to teach the faith to the children of your congregation. The reason you have confirmation is so students know they are loved by God. The reason you serve ice cream at confirmation is so kids have time to connect and build a community of faith in a social setting.
If we can adjust our expectations around the ways we do things and instead focus on the reasons we do things we might find space to continue living in this pandemic reality with a bit more freedom and grace. The same applies to worship and Bible study and outreach and all the other wonderful things your congregation does. You can continue to worship. You can continue to learn. You can continue to serve your community. You might just have to continue to find new ways to do so.

I know it can be exhausting to have to try so many new things. Which is why we must also adjust our expectations of ourselves. We aren’t going to get every new thing right the first time. I don’t.

Maybe the first time you held an outdoor worship service it was a disaster. Perhaps the microphones didn’t work and the wind blew everything over. The ways might need to be adjusted. That’s okay. If you remember the reason for gathering your perspective might shift. Focusing on the reasons we do things allows us to focus on what is essential and work out from there. If the reason for worship is to gather people to worship God, be fed through the proclamation of the Word and be sent into the world for service…well there are a myriad of ways this can happen. Focusing on the reasons frees us from fixating on the ways. The ways have to change. The reasons do not.

I understand we might be feeling decision fatigue and yet, there are more decisions ahead. We are going to have to continue to adjust and do things differently. Be sure to pay attention to your expectations of yourself and others. Do the expectations you have fit our current reality? Do your expectations need to be adjusted in light of all the other changes taking place?

Together, we are finding new ways forward. We are forging new paths and doing things in ways we haven’t done them before. Adjust your expectations to ensure there is room for experimentation, failure, and plenty of grace.

Our sense of grace, of course, is rooted in the one thing that does not change: the steadfast love of God.

Other things might shift. The presence of the Spirit, the faithfulness of God, the hope of the resurrection - these things remain. Proclaiming this good news is reason to continue in the work God has called us to even if the ways we do so continue to change.

In this with you.

In Christ,

Bishop Regina Hassanally
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