

Dear St. Luke's Parishioners,

There's no denying, life is a journey, full of trials and triumphs, moments of ease and moments of effort. The constant in this journey is that we are accompanied by our God (our work is to keep eyes and ears open for signs to that effect) and we are informed by our faith (our work is to read, reflect, and never forget).

I share this observation with you as it seems that the Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus is creating new trials and requiring renewed efforts.

I imagine most of us rejoiced when liberated from earlier mask mandates, and likewise, felt a moment of triumph as vaccines were developed and found to be highly successful in preventing infection. The finding that not only were we protected, once vaccinated, from serious illness but also that it was unlikely we could spread the virus to others more vulnerable, seemed to give many of us a new lease on life. There's no missing the renewed joy that has been in the warm summer air.

But despite these joyous feelings, I often have noted, the virus is not sentimental, and we must follow science not sentiment as we make our way. This approach served us well when we decided to suspend in-person worship for two periods of time over the past year and a half; this approach served us well again as we gradually resumed gathering in person this spring. Because of our attention to science and our respect for protocols, we were able to avoid any spread of the virus by way of church activities.

I remain grateful to the steering committee who helped chart the course for these past several months. And I am equally grateful to all of you who were supportive and observant as our practices shifted with the times.

Now it seems that we must again change our practices. As of this writing, the CDC tracker shows that Rhode Island is in the "Substantial Transmission" category—with total new cases in the week of July 24 reaching a figure of 55 per 100,000. This number is up from 29 cases per 100,000 just one week ago. The number of new cases reported yesterday was 145.

In addition, our test positive rate is also climbing, rising from 1.0% for the week beginning July 17 to 1.8% for the week beginning July 24. Yesterday's test positive figure was 2.6%.

Equally troubling are the findings that those vaccinated are experiencing "breakthrough" infections and, once infected, able to transmit the virus to others (whether they be vaccinated or not). Thankfully, breakthrough infections remain relatively infrequent

and in the vast majority of circumstances the vaccines continue to protect against serious illness. But nonetheless, the recent developments have shifted the CDC's recommendations and, as before, I believe we must pay attention to their counsel.

I have called a meeting for this evening (July 29) of the COVID Response Steering Committee to discuss these trends and the CDC's recommendations. In advance of the entire group gathering I have been able to talk with two members and we have **agreed that at the very least we should resume our mask-wearing and contact-tracing practices effective this Sunday, August 1.**

The larger group will discuss other elements of our Sunday experience tonight but, up against our Weekly publication deadline, I wanted to get this information out to you right away. Stay tuned for further communications as decisions are made.

I, like I imagine many of you, am saddened by what feels like a step backward in this particular journey. And yet, with each passing day we are one day closer to truly containing this virus. I am heartened that in one form or another I get to spend these days with all of you. And I am strengthened by the belief that God shares this journey with us all.

May you be well physically, emotionally, and spiritually. May you find the strength, faith, and resilience to continue the journey with hope. And throughout it all, may God bless you with that peace which passes all understanding.

Peace,

Jim