

November 23, 2020

Greetings:

THANK YOU!!

It's the season of Thanksgiving, so that seems like the right way to begin this letter. And I am; I am profoundly grateful for this congregation and for our life and ministry together, and especially through the extraordinary circumstances of 2020.

In the face of all those challenges, this congregation has not simply remained faithful in our worship and learning and service and common life; we have been both patient and bold in pursuing our mission as a congregation *"...to explore how God's gracious love gives meaning to our lives and inspires us to address the needs of our world."*

Perhaps the most obvious way we have been both patient and bold was in pivoting to digital ministry back in mid-March. We did not know, of course, that it would be months instead of weeks that we would be doing such a thing. But we committed to doing so out of love for each other and our neighbors: to care for one another by "remaining together while being apart" through digital worship.

We learned to celebrate the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion in this way, to walk through the shadows of Holy Week, to rejoice in Christ's resurrection on Easter. The Chancel Choir even learned how to create anthems together by recording their voices at home; what a joy it was to be led in worship by them once again!

And it was not simply limited to worship. K-Groups gathered for study and prayer and deep sharing. The children's Sunday School gathered on Zoom each Sunday. The church staff worked seamlessly together even with many of them working almost exclusively online. Numerous adult education offerings were presented on Zoom.

And many of us were surprised to discover how powerfully the Holy Spirit could still move in digital space, how strong we could be in spiritual community with one another when we were physically distant. And in the process, we discovered what initially felt like a hindrance to our ministry was actually expanding it. Our "community at a distance" has welcomed people from all over the country and even the world!

That expanded ministry has been powerful, even transformative. One woman who began worshipping with us in this digital-only time did so from her bed in another state where she has been recovering slowly from COVID-19 as a "long-hauler," someone with symptoms for weeks and even months after the initial onset.

She found me on Facebook recently and sent me a note, saying, "Thank you for making space for me when I can't even get out of bed. There is so much that is so hard right now, and I feel so isolated most of the time. But when Sunday morning comes, and you ask people to share peace with one another, they do it! And I feel it. I feel peace; I feel hope. And I need peace and hope right now. So thank you. Tell your church I said thank you."

So thank you, First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem; thank you for this remarkable year of ministry in such extraordinary circumstances. Thank you for demonstrating what we mean in our mission statement when we say, *“Through our worship, learning, and service, God fills us with purpose, compassion, courage, and hope.”*

Friends, as we turn to 2021, circumstances continue to be extraordinary and uncertain in our world. But our mission, our purpose is clear: it is needed, and it is powerful. So I want to ask you to give as generously as you can in making and fulfilling your pledge of financial support for this congregation in 2021, so that we can reach further, and serve better, and share in peace and hope more fully than we ever have before.

Grace and Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J.C. Austin'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

The Rev. J.C. Austin
Senior Pastor