

Sermon Title: **“The United Methodist Way of Relaunching In-Person Worship”**

Bible: **Matthew 22:34-40**

Where & When: at Gilroy UMC on Sunday, June 28, 2020

Audience: about 25 YouTube Live-streaming viewers

Opening Prayer

Our Lord, source of wisdom, courage, and love, thank you so much for calling us your children. That’s because we need you, and because we love you. As you love us, we want to love each other, even in this time. Please give us your wisdom, your courage, and your love. Please be with my lips in your love and grace. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

1. Love God and Love Each Other

We are Christians. We follow Jesus. What does it mean? Someone asked Jesus what the greatest commandment is. Jesus answered: “First, love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and second, love your neighbor as yourself.” In this time of the unknown, the time of Phase 2 or Phase 3, how can we love God, and how can we love each other? I have prepared this message to talk about the United Methodist Way of relaunching in-person worship. Before sharing this, I would like to share my own love story.

2. My Own Love Story

As you know, I love a woman. Thankfully, I got married to this beautiful woman. But our love is not that easy. Because of my immaturity, my hard financial situation, somewhat complicated Visa status, and my daring dream to be a Methodist pastor, I stayed in the States, and my wife needed to stay in Korea. We thought that the longest we would be apart at a time would be one

year, and that we could get together after one year. I thought that one year would be okay for me, and we could be fine to meet each other once a year. We saved money for our Christmas vacation: a round trip flight ticket for my wife from Korea to San Francisco, a beautiful hotel and nice restaurants, and so on. It was definitely worth preparing for Christmas vacation for one year, because I love my wife. It was not easy, but joyful, because I was able to meet up with her in person. We talked on the phone, texted a lot, and saw each other via FaceTime. However, meeting her in-person was the best! You know what? I ended up living this way for three years. When my Visa status was okay, my financial situation was not okay. When my financial situation was okay, we needed to wait for the Visa. I had suffered from insomnia during that time. Meanwhile, I hoped to become more mature, and I became a Methodist pastor. Finally, after three years--after three Christmases--I am able to live together with my lovely wife. I love my wife with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind, and with all my body. Yeah, I am a healthy man.

3. United Methodist Way of Relaunching In-Person Worship

It has been about 100 days, as we have changed our worship format from in-person to YouTube live-streaming. I would like to make sure that we never close the church. We are still the church. We have only closed our church buildings. We worship together at the same time. We pray for each other together. We have small groups and fellowship via Zoom. We contact each other via phone calls, texts, emails, and facebook. We care about those who are marginalized. We stand against social injustice, and we help those who are in need with our generosity. The building is not the church. People are the church.

However, we miss our faith community, and we miss each other so much, not screen to screen, but face to face. If someone asks what the greatest principles are for the United Methodist Church to relaunch in-person worship, I will answer with John Wesley's three simple rules: Do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God. In the time of phase 1, we should stay home and save lives. We did this very well, and we have been safe and healthy. Now, even though the guidelines might be changed again, we are on the way to Phase 3. We might be able to see each other face-to-face with a lot of preparation. Our California-Nevada Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church provides a list of guidelines and protocols, while providing three webinars, or online lectures, about how to do this. This 20-page handbook of "Relaunching in-person worship and ministry activities during and following the COVID-19 pandemic" is just an example. This is a draft for a local church to start with their own plan. I will not go into detail. I just want to share some basics. If you join our Zoom Q&A time after worship, you can hear more details. The first thing to do is to develop a relaunching ministry team of 3 to 10 people, including the pastor, lay leader, chair of Trustees, chair of SPRC, and others. The team prays to seek God's guidance to follow John Wesley's Three Simple Rules. The team plans according to our context, realistically, honestly, and creatively. The team writes down and submits the plan to our new District Superintendent, Rev. Samuel Hong. After the approval by our District Superintendent, we can share our plan with our congregation. In this process, we need to monitor and follow the updated guidelines of the CDC, the state of California, and Santa Clara County. This process definitely requires our time, our energy, some costs, and all of our patience.

Regardless of this process, we will continue our YouTube Worship. So we can worship together at the same time wherever you are. But, the in-person worship is not like what we did before. I edited a survey question that one of the churches in Santa Clara County uses. Probably only 5 to 10 additional people could be present in the Sanctuary at one time, because we need to practice social distancing, and because we have an online worship team here in the building that would have to be included in our overall count as well. Everyone must wear a mask. Everyone would most likely need to sign a waiver and have their temperature checked at the door. We are not allowed to sing, due to the increased possibility of transmission. Before and after worship, we would need to clean and disinfect all areas that we use, probably like the hospitals clean and disinfect, which costs money. The in-person worship under these circumstances will be very different from what we are used to experiencing together.

4. Santa Clara County and Our Context

We are still in the pandemic. So, I checked out the guidelines of Santa Clara County Public Health. For now, Santa Clara County does not allow indoor religious gatherings. They allow outdoor religious gatherings of less than 25 people. These outdoor religious gatherings are also required to follow the United Methodist way that I explained. And I also checked out their dashboard data. Their dashboard data provides detailed information about cases and deaths from COVID-19 in Santa Clara County. This data would be updated almost like a daily base. You can see this on their website. The numbers of the new cases in June are similar to those in April. Because we do not have any vaccines or treatments yet, I also checked out the death dashboard

by age group. Because our congregation is part of a vulnerable/high-risk population, we need to consider our own context honestly.

5. Let us Pray!

After Sunday Worship on July 12th, I plan to have a Lay Leadership Team meeting, in order to establish a relaunching team. If you want to join this team, please read this handbook prayerfully for two weeks. We need to seek God's guidance for ourselves together. What is "Do no harm" at this time in Gilroy? What is "Do good?" What is "Stay in Love with God?" Gilroy church needs your prayers. For two weeks, let us build our prayers for the team and the congregation. To relaunch in-person worship could take more time than we had imagined. However, please do not forget how we miss each other and we love each other. God's love and grace is with us, even in this challenging time.

Closing Prayer

Oh, Merciful God, in this time, we need your guidance. We want to follow you. Please guide us to do no harm, to do good, and to stay in love with God. Please hear our prayers, oh Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.