

Brothers and Sisters of First Church,

This past week you heard Mitch Marcello, our Director of Worship, share these words during our Sunday morning worship announcements:

Ephesians 5:21 says to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. As a church, we have been encouraged as we've seen our church attempt to do this through the past year in a variety of ways. Despite differing viewpoints on masks, we have made sacrifices and grown together as a church and as a community. It will be important moving forward to continue to seek empathy while also seeking to understand people's walks who are different than our own.

One of the ways we have sought to submit to one another over this past year has been through an intentional effort to communicate clearly as changes have arisen. We have sought to do our best to provide clear communication whenever there have been significant changes or updates regarding COVID protocols. We have done this through a series phases related to the lessening of restrictions as circumstances have allowed. Today, I offer a further update in this process.

At the end of last week, the CDC offered a significant update regarding guidance around the wearing of masks. In short, the CDC has stated that masks are no longer required for those who are fully vaccinated. The State of Pennsylvania affirmed these guidelines at the end of last week, specifically on May 13.

Throughout this entire COVID period, we have done our best to follow the guidelines provided by those with expertise in health care matters. We have done our best to keep people safe in a responsible manner while also getting back to some semblance of normalcy as able.

It goes without saying that no decision will satisfy everyone. Some will continue to feel that we have been too cautious. Others will respond to the same decision by arguing we have been too loose in our application of restrictions.

Therefore, I ask, again, that we demonstrate a spirit of graciousness, compassion, and charity to all as we move forward and seek to submit to one another. Again, I thank you for the many ways you have already done this.

In light of the recent lessening of restrictions suggested by the CDC and affirmed by Pennsylvania governance, we offer the following changes to our safety protocols effective immediately:

- Fully vaccinated persons will no longer be required to wear masks for worship or indoors
- For life groups and other ministries using the facilities, this protocol applies for those gatherings as well
- Maximum capacity levels at both services will be lifted
- In situations where there are those present who have not yet been able to be vaccinated or do not feel fully safe, social distancing is still encouraged, however pews will no longer be blocked off.
- Children over the age of 2, as well as unvaccinated youth and adults, will be encouraged to mask while in the building.

We realize that we are not in a position to police this for every individual. Therefore, I am asking for your honesty at this time based on you and your situation. This should go without saying for us as Christians and as the Church, but I also realize there are many strong feelings around masks. In short, please do what will be considerate of others.

Please do not forget, we will continue offering our online worship opportunity for those who desire that experience as a way of remaining connected.

Finally, we recognize that some who are fully vaccinated will want to continue to wear a mask. We want to honor those who desire to do this and welcome them among us. It is our desire to honor everyone where they are in this journey and seek to be gracious and compassionate to all.

Thank you all again for your help and cooperation in these endeavors. While circumstances are certainly not ideal, we continue to have the opportunity to offer a countercultural witness that models the love of Christ in a way we do not see exemplified in our wider culture as we submit to one another in Christ's love.

Specifically, here is what I want to invite us to do today: If you believe strongly that masks should not be worn, in the spirit of Philippians 2 which invites us to "consider others ahead of ourselves," would you seek to love fiercely those who do want to or need to wear masks? And if you are one who believes strongly in wearing masks, in the spirit of Philippians 2 which invites us to "consider others ahead of ourselves," would you seek to love fiercely those who DO NOT want to or need to wear masks because they are fully vaccinated? In this way we can support one another as we continue in this journey.

As always, I am grateful for you First Church. Thank you for your patience as we work through this time together.

In Christ,
Pastor Matt