It's not a concern, he said. The virus, we believe, is politically motivated. We hold our religious rights dear, and we are going to assemble no matter what someone says.

Newsweek reported this week about a church in Louisiana that met as usual for worship last Sunday. That pastor told the online weekly: I had 1,170 in attendance Sunday. We have 27 buses on Sundays picking up people in a five-parish area.

He also said his congregants were not at risk from the coronavirus because the church is a “hospital” where “anointed handkerchiefs” have the ability to heal people of multiple diseases.¹ Praise God.

Look, we’re all shaken by the disruption caused by this virus. It’s drastically reshaped our human interactions as such. We have to do this for now. But this online worship is not a new normal; it’s just an extended abnormal. Regular Wilshire worshipers long for the time that we can greet one another with a hungry hug and a holy kiss.

We like to say our church is Open to All, Closed to None. And that’s still true, even though the signs on the doors of the building right now may suggest otherwise. The saying is still true, though, because the church has never been a building; it’s always been a people. Our mission statement says, We are building a community of faith shaped by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It doesn’t say we are a building shaped by a community of faith.

Crises clarify. We find out what we really believe, who we really are. We see where our life together is sound and where it needs shoring up. That includes our faith, which always involves loving our neighbors as ourselves.

When we defy the best wisdom of the medical community

¹ https://www.newsweek.com/pastor-holds-service-over-1000-parishoners-defiance-large-gathering-ban-1493113?fbclid=IwAR0G0akZRGHSLhR0uVQ

EMrwXj1pT0njByhabEXVVVGs0ofZBywq67a66VB0
because we think we have inside knowledge that protects us, our faith is failing. And we are not the only victims. Others are victimized by us.

It turns out that about 60 percent of the cases of COVID-19 in South Korea can be traced to one large church that met in defiance of public health advice. 60 percent! The pastor of that church teaches that being sick is a sin. He encourages followers to attend packed services regardless of illness to prove their faith.²

This theology, which connects sin and sickness, is as old as the Bible. We see it in our text this morning from John 9 about a blind man whom Jesus healed. As Jesus and his disciples come upon a man who was blind from birth, they ask Jesus whether it was his sin or the sin of his parents that brought about the man’s blindness. Jesus doesn’t go there with them. He is plain that it wasn’t sin that caused this sickness. It is for the glory of God, he says.

Even here we have to be careful. Jesus is not saying that God made the man blind in order to bring Godself more glory. God is not a cosmic narcissist needing constant praise, even in times of a pandemic. Jesus is the true revealer of the nature of God. And he tells us not to make this link between sin and sickness or to see God behind every illness.

My colleague, the Rev. Jacqui Lewis of Middle Collegiate Church in Manhattan, put it well this week: God does not cause viruses. God does not punish people with sickness. God is not a shiny plastic bubble to keep you safe. God is Love. That’s enough: LOVE is enough.³

Love was enough for the man born blind. Jesus healed him. But the way he healed him was curious. He didn’t just pray for him or announce his healing. He stooped down and made mud to apply to his eyes. Then he told him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. (Maybe for 20 seconds?) When the man did so, he was healed. He could see.

Now here we may see a positive connection between religion and science, between faith and medicine. Both contribute their parts to true healing.

² Ibid.

³ From her Twitter account.
It would be eighteen more centuries before the rise of modern medicine, but medicine is grounded in the science of nature. Our preventive vaccines and therapeutic drugs come from natural sources. In a pre-modern time, Jesus shows himself grounded in the earth as well as he is inspired by heaven. He applies a kind of salve to the man’s eyes and has him wash. This may seem unnecessary to us, since we assume that Jesus could have just wiped the man’s eyes with an anointed handkerchief, don’t you know?!

By the way, to my knowledge these handkerchiefs I wear in my suit pocket aren’t anointed, except maybe with tears.

This is where I want to go next with you. The effects of this virus hit us during the season of Lent, a time when we already call ourselves to the deep work of contemplation. Our theme this year has been God Be in Us. We’ve explored the Sarum Prayer these past few weeks that begins,

God be in my head and in my understanding.
God be in my eyes and in my looking.
God be in my mouth and in my speaking.

Today we come to the fourth strophe:

God be in my heart and in my thinking.

We usually associate the mind with thinking, not the heart. The heart in biblical faith refers not to the place within us where we feel most deeply. This is gut thinking, which is different from brain thinking. The mind makes distinctions and allows us to see ourselves over against others; the heart makes connections and calls us into solidarity with others.

Notice both the disciples and the religious leaders in this story. Both thought with their minds more than their hearts. They were skilled at othering people. When you focus on sin, you objectify others. You don’t see yourself connected to them.

That’s not all bad if you’re in a science lab. Science works by separating things, breaking them down to the smallest possible parts to understand them. Medicine then builds on science by activating the healing agents to bring separated things back together. In this way, medicine is actually more akin to the work of the church than science. And yet some people think the church should bypass medicinal healing
The disciples want to find the reason why the man was separated from his sight. Jesus wants to give the man his sight. The religious leaders want to investigate the healing that was done on the sabbath day in order to separate Jesus as a law-breaking sinner. Compare them to the man who was healed. He now sees with the eyes of his heart, not just the eyes in his head. He doesn’t say he knows how Jesus did what he did, only that he did. And he chides the religious experts for focusing on the wrong things instead of joining him in praising and glorifying God for healed.

When the church is doing its proper work, we look for the direction of healing and follow it. We don’t get bogged down in why things are the way they are. We ask what good may come from the way things are. We are more interested in the what for than the what, in the how come than the how, in the because than the cause. We are creatures of healing and hope. This is our mission in the world. This is what we have to offer.

We lose our focus when we think with our minds and not our hearts. Our minds speculate; our hearts congregate. Our minds separate; our hearts communicate. Our minds dissemble; our hearts assemble.

We need more heart thinking from the church today, more empathy, more compassion. There’s too much anger, too much blaming and polarizing. We may not all be together physically in these days, but we need to come together spiritually. This is the direction of healing, for us and for our world.

Maria Shriver said this week: 
This is a time when 'heart-based leadership' is critical and we're each capable of being those kinds of leaders and healers for each other. ... We will get through this global pandemic if we all act responsibly and if we lead with compassion and love.

Heart-based leadership is the church’s specialty. Leading with compassion and love is the church’s very way of being. It also turns out to be just what the world needs most.

When people ask me about our church, I always say the same thing—they are a compassionate
and courageous congregation.
The word *courage* comes from the French word for *heart*. We think with our hearts. Especially in tough times. Times like these. We can do hard things, church. We've got this, Wilshire. Amen.