

Dear Friends,

In my sermon last Sunday, I talked about “March Madness,” the collegiate basketball tournament. But there is another athletic competition this month that borders on a bit of madness due to the extreme nature of the sport.

It’s the annual Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in Alaska that begins on the first weekend in March. Musher and their dogs travel icy, snowy, cold conditions on treacherous trails along a 1000 mile course from Anchorage to Nome. The winner usually completes the journey in about nine days, but the race isn’t over until the last sled crosses the finish line.

This year, while still grueling, the race’s course has been altered to avoid populated towns and cities and the length has been shortened to (a mere!) 850 miles in order to accommodate time-consuming coronavirus testing and precautions.

The Iditarod Race is held for sport. However, in 2021 as we confront the coronavirus, there is an unavoidable resonance with the triumphant 1925 sled dog run from Anchorage to Nome when Nome’s population was threatened by diphtheria. The serum was delivered by sled dog, and saved many lives and prevented untold heartache.

These days, we are mindful of the challenges many people face as they endeavor to receive the Covid-19 vaccine. While navigating the often-confusing online application process or remaining interminably “on hold” on the telephone or being told that appointments are unavailable until months away – just imagine if we had to wait for the sled dog team to arrive!

Presently, Alaskans in remote villages are battling Covid-19 and are fervently awaiting vaccinations. As a sad testament to its prevalence, pervasiveness, and perniciousness – the coronavirus has found its lethal way to people living just outside the Arctic Circle. *The New York Time reports*, “In a state where the Indigenous population has been ravaged by global disease outbreaks for generations, the coronavirus pandemic has killed Alaska Natives at quadruple the rate of white residents.”

The good news is that through committed and concerted efforts and vaccine availability, Alaska currently ranks as the number one state in the nation for residents having received their second dose of a vaccine. The vaccine is being delivered by turboprop planes, boats, snowmobiles, and sleds. Amid the pandemic’s tragedies that so many around the world have endured during the past year, this is an inspiring story of compassion, collaboration, and competence.

Decades ago, David and I owned two Siberian huskies. They were beautiful dogs with striking markings and piercing blue eyes. One Saturday, David and some friends attended a sled dog race at the Pachaug State Forest in Voluntown, Connecticut. Unbeknownst to David, they entered him in the race and handed him the reins to a sled. Let’s just say that the ill-fated venture would have passed into oblivion had it not been for a Channel 3 television news crew that filmed and broadcasted the embarrassing episode.

In addition to learning that David was probably never going to enter Alaska’s Iditarod Race, I also learned some things about racing. Each dog pulls the sled with its own strength; however, if you introduce another dog, the generated power equals more than two individual dogs. I’ll never forget the “musher math” that *three dogs* equals the power, strength, and endurance of *five dogs*!

Isn’t this true as well as *for humans* as we work together in the church and elsewhere? Whether we join forces to help people receive their vaccines or provide meals for hungry folks or purchase hats and gloves for people who can’t afford these items or donate to the One Great Hour of Sharing offering – when we work and give together, our efforts and effectiveness are multiplied over and over.

In Ecclesiastes 4:9, it says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil." Just think about how three are better than two, and four are better than three, and so forth in terms of accomplishing much. Never forget – how as a church community – we can achieve much. Together, we can do great, rewarding, faithful, and generous things!

God bless,  
Jane

P.S. I hope that you join us this evening, **Wednesday, March 10 at 7:00 p.m.** on Zoom for our discussion about what brings us joy. Deacon Nancy Johnson is leading the conversation and all are welcome to attend!

First Church Portland is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: First Church Portland's Lenten Series: Joy

Time: Mar 10, 2021 07:00 PM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86707811026?pwd=T3RxdTB0TTRSMUF2V0xWVm5JMnRxQT09>

Meeting ID: 867 0781 1026

Passcode: 079395