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**From the Office of the Pastor**

Gird on sackcloth and lament, O priests,

wail, O ministers of the altar.

Go in, pass the night in sackcloth,

O ministers of my God!

Because cereal offering and drink offering

are withheld from the house of your God. Joel 1:13

“Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Mark 12:28-31

March 31, 2020

**To the saints of Advent Lutheran and Lebanon Lutheran Churches,**

Please forgive the common letter…

but much of the information contained herein is necessary for both congregations, and so I am addressing each in regard to recent events and in order to help set our course through Holy Week and beyond.

Yesterday, after viewing the Live Stream from Governor Northam and hearing the new executive order to all Virginians to stay at home, I wrote a letter to Lebanon’s Church Council members providing them with guidance regarding the issue.

The full text of Executive Order 55 may be found here:

<https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/executive-actions/EO-55-Temporary-Stay-at-Home-Order-Due-to-Novel-Coronavirus-(COVID-19).pdf>

What follows is the substance of that letter, changed only to make it relevant to the congregations:

…This new order declares that some forms of travel outside the home are excepted from the order. For our purposes, the most important is the language that the public may continue to travel to “their house[s] of worship”. Even so, it is clear that the point of the order is that people should stay home and not travel for non-essential reasons.

To be sure, it is essential for the Body of Christ to meet. Normatively, this means “at least weekly on the Lord’s Day.” It is a great comfort and blessing for the people of God to meet with one another, give thanks, hear the Word of Christ again, pray for all, sing, and share the Holy Communion. It is one of the essential signs of the Church in the world to meet in this way.

These are definitely not normal times. The normative course is not the only faithful one in times of extremity.   
  
We will certainly continue to meet at some future point, *but I ask that we postpone any sort of meeting for a time*. This would, of course, apply to Lebanon’s recent Communion proposal for Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. I would rather fast together for a time as a congregation than have a less than ideal Communion practice that could still serve to further spread COVID-19. I want all of us to do this willingly as a form of discipline and service to our neighbors. We know few definitive facts about COVID-19, but those that we do illustrate its virulence and communicability.

Regarding a possible Communion Service at Lebanon, I assert that this is not a simple issue of whether one or two of us (God forbid it) get the disease and recover from it (God grant it), it is also about how we may inadvertently spread the virus to others, and those others to more and more. I encourage the congregations to look at our willing fast as form of love for our neighbors, a positive service to them. Indeed, having a Communion meal that does not seek the common good seems at odds with the spirit of the Meal our Lord has instituted.

Furthermore, and as a *secondary* consideration, if we fast in this manner, we would be obeying both the spirit and the letter of the law of the land. I say “letter” because we would be honoring the social distancing requirement that we remain six feet from other people (which, surely, makes Communion in any way that could be recognized as the Sacred Meal we normatively observe at Lebanon impossible). I say “spirit” because, even when we consider the exceptions, the point of the order is to keep all Virginians at home for a time in order to halt the spread of the virus.   
  
Halting the spread of the virus is a goal worth achieving, even if it means that we agree not to come together as a congregation for a time.

I want to state one thing very clearly: the reception of Holy Communion, while a wonderful gift of our gracious God, *is not essential for our salvation*. We may “feast on the Word in faith” receiving “with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:21). No one should believe that they must have the Holy Communion on pain of losing salvation or due to fear of inviting God’s wrath. I will quickly and forcefully speak against any suggestion to the contrary.

I do not offer this guidance in haste or without having thought about many of the implications and eventualities involved in such a decision – in fact, there is little else that I have thought and prayed about lately. I know that we will necessarily have to revisit this policy when things improve, or, may God forbid it, if they worsen. I ask for your sincere and persistent prayers that God lift this plague soon and very soon.

I will, of course, make the Holy Communion available to those who are *in extremis*, that is, near death or in immediate danger of it.

I am asking the Councils and Congregations to follow and accept this pastoral guidance – in a spirit of unity and brotherly love. Please, it may be needless, but I will make the appeal: let us remember that this is not a time for backbiting, second-guessing, and party spirit. We have an opportunity to serve as faithful examples of Christlike love for our neighbor. Let’s receive that opportunity in a spirit of godliness and faith as we continue to pray for the good of all.

…

**WHAT THIS WILL MEAN FOR HOLY WEEK**

* I will not hold the previously scheduled Services of Holy Communion on Palm Sunday or Easter Sunday.
* I will provide some Service of Scripture, Prayer, and Preaching with or without musical accompaniment, for Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday – unless new events make any of this impossible. This will be either at one of the two congregational buildings or at my home, streamed live or recorded and posted at the Church Websites.
* I will attempt, if I am able, to have some form of devotion or Service for Maundy Thursday.

**WHAT IT MEANS FOR GENERAL PASTORAL CARE AND DUTY**

* I will continue to be available for pastoral conversation via phone, email, text, or IM.
* I will not offer any sort of “virtual Communion” at any time, as I am not convinced of the propriety of such a Service.
* I will attempt to administer Holy Communion to those who are near death or in danger of dying.
* I am researching ways to have “virtual” gatherings for discussion and prayer, meetings, and for Christian education. Rev. Cutlip is also preparing virtual opportunities for Adult Sunday School.
* I would like for the CREDO Groups and the Confessions Study Group to consider a form of virtual meeting – ZOOM is a popular medium for this.

As we approach the culmination of our Lenten Season and the great Festival of the Resurrection draws near, let us be persistent in prayer and study, in intercession and humble service, and in mutual support of one another and reconnection to our families and loves ones.

This will be a strange Holy Week and Easter day, no doubt. But we can be certain that the Lord Christ has irrevocably committed to His people and will never abandon us. He walks the way of sorrow as one unjustly persecuted and despised, but He will be vindicated on the Great Third Day. We will celebrate that victory, though we will not celebrate it as a gathered body this year. Like the Jews dispersed in Babylon, we are now dispersed for a time… but *we worship the Lord of time and space*, the Crucified and Resurrected One, Jesus Christ, Who will gather us again to Himself.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:20-21

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