

## PASTORAL MESSAGE

We normally have very full lives. They are full of work and play, relationships and food, visuals and sound. There is much that is delightful about our pace of our normal life, both ours and the world around us, but this can get in the way of other things that are also important. It can be challenging to truly be present to the people around us or to delight in the activities and commitments. Even if we try to slow down life, it can feel counter-cultural and just hard.



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Under duress our world has slowed us all down, so we can protect the health of our vulnerable neighbors. We are all trying to continue the most important things in life: our own and our loved ones' health and sustenance; our work or studies; and our relationships with others. Yet the costs for us have already been high, closing our schools, surrounding businesses, and many of our own workplaces. We have been asked not to be physically close to people outside the ones with whom we live. This is an extreme vision of a Lenten fast. This season of limits can feel constricting, disappointing, and even scary.

When Martin Luther wrote about fasting, or abstaining from luxury (beyond what is necessary), he acknowledged that such a practice can control the body and its excesses. However, for Luther, fasting also made space for God's presence and our practices of faith. Luther wrote, "[W]hen the stomach is full, the body does not serve for preaching, for praying, for studying, or for doing anything that is good." (SL 19, 1017) He observed that some emptiness opens a space for God's presence and work, and for a fuller encounter of God's grace.

As members of the body of Christ, we have been given a gift! God's word and God's own self have been placed at the center of our lives: not just on Sundays, but every day. As Christians, we are called to find a healthy balance of work, play, and sabbath, of relationships and quiet. We are called to seek God's presence in prayer, reading the word, and mutual care for one another. We do so remembering the promises of the sacraments that define us. We cling to the promise of forgiveness through the waters and grace of baptism. We recall the treasure of the Eucharistic meal, and Christ's sacrifice of love for the world.

In normal circumstances, church is the community where we worship God, and learn about faith, and serve in Jesus' name. It is usually a joy to be among our sisters and brothers in Christ, and we simply cannot be together right now. Our health crisis demands that we not gather in person at church or anywhere else. Like many of you, our church staff continues to work with appropriate social distance. We are reaching out in care for our congregation members and neighbors in need. We are doing our best to continue offering accessible worship and Christian education opportunities.

However, social distance means that we miss important things in our Christian life together. As a congregation, we treasure the Holy Eucharist, Christ's meal in which he literally feeds the baptized people of God with his own body and blood. Lutherans believe that it is not a private sacrament; it always rightly occurs in the gathering of God's people, small though that gathering may be.

Because the body of Christ cannot gather for Holy Eucharist, then we, your pastors, are not celebrating Eucharist at all, though we have the authority to do so. It is not meant to be only watched on a screen. Neither is it meant to be watched in person and withheld from the faithful, as I experienced countless times as the lone Lutheran attending Catholic mass. It would be torturous for a starving person to watch others feast and yet to remain hungry themselves. We are all fasting together – sacramentally and otherwise – and that includes your pastors. Because none of us can be fed together, we will not receive Christ in front of you. Of course, if someone is very ill or nearing death and we pastors are permitted to visit, we would gladly bring the sacrament, but that would be a pastoral exception to the rule.

This is yet another emptiness, nurturing in us a longing for God and God's people. Thankfully, where we seem to see only emptiness and loss, God knows that new life and joy may be created.

I invite you to set aside some time to contemplate how you may be able to welcome and experience God's presence in these bizarre days of limitation. For centuries, monastic communities have known how the Holy Spirit can teach us to be in one place, with a small group of people, helping us find Christ's unexpected gift of peace. The Spirit can cultivate in us a life of unceasing prayer, spoken aloud in words, sung in music, thought in the mind, and felt with the heart. (1 Thess 5:17) Held by the word and in care for one another, the Spirit can help us grow deeper in understanding and love of God. It can expand our expressions of care for and service to the world around us – transforming our relationships, our time, and even our imaginations.

May this time of change nurture all of us in our faith, that we may continue to give glory to God in our life together.