



Southeastern Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

April 3, 2020

Dear church,

The hymn, “We who once were dead,” states these words that I have been drawn to in these days of learning to worship while not being able to physically gather as an assembly:

We who once were dead now live, fully knowing Jesus as our head. Life is over flowing when he breaks the bread. We were lost in night, but you sought and found us. Give us strength to fight; death is all around us. Jesus, be our light.

We now live as a world, a humanity, and a church in ways we have never had to or imagined. And we will be changed because of this in ways that we are not even able to fully know at this point. The rising cases of COVID-19 seem to continue to grow increasingly daily, and as the hymn above states, “death is all around us.”

And we are left with the same question that Paul asked in Romans, “What are we to say about these things. . .?” (8:31) As I said in the letter regarding the cancellation of synod assembly, what then are we to say about these things? these things concerning COVID-19, a global pandemic. What then are we to say: to anxious and fearful ones among us, the parents learning how to homeschool and the child who struggles with those realities, the graduate who will not have a ceremony, the elder who can’t receive visitors, the now unemployed, the congregation who lives in a new reality of what it means to be church, to you and whatever your questions are?

We proclaim what we know and who we know best. We proclaim the inseparable love of Jesus Christ, and we proclaim that nothing in all of creation, nothing, not even a COVID-19 virus separates us from that love.

What then are we to say about these things, these things of worship? In these days of a global pandemic that seems to be growing ever more wildly daily, we know that there is more about this than what we know. We have been urged by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to continue practicing physical distancing to flatten the curve.

I, along with the Synod Council of this synod, strongly implore and encourage you not to physically gather in worship through Holy Week and Easter and up to April 26, a date that may very well need to be extended into May. As you make this decision, please also continue to consult what the CDC, local and state governments are suggesting; if you choose not to follow that advice. We all grieve this decision, but the health and welfare of all of our members are of the utmost importance.

As we approach Holy Week, Easter Sunday and the Great Fifty Days of Easter; it seems unimaginable to not to take part in Holy Communion and I like many of you have been asking that question then “What are we to say about these things?”

A thousand years ago, churches taught that the lone priest had the mysterious power to create the presence of Christ by speaking the Words of Institution over the bread and wine.

It was also commonly understood that one's communion served only one's self, which was symbolized and achieved by the use of individual wafers consumed once a year.

Over the last hundred years, many churches have amended these positions. The ordained ministers of word and sacrament proclaim a substantial prayer of thanksgiving which includes the Words of Institution, not as a magic formula, but as the assembly's praise for God's salvation to all the people. The growing use of a loaf of bread, consumed every Sunday, symbolizes and effects the sense that the entire body of Christ shares in this salvation.

It appears that for many weeks after Easter 2020, churches will not be able to conduct assembly worship physically together, but must continue to rely on the presence of Christ in the word read and preached for the sustenance of the faithful and so **I recommend that we continue to delay communion until the assembly can gather in person.**

Dr. Timothy Wengert points out in a brief paper on sharing the eucharist during the pandemic, (Holy Communion Under Quarantine 3.17.20), Luther wrote, "...even if throughout life they did not dare or could not receive the Eucharist... the Eucharist is not so necessary that salvation depends on it. The gospel and baptism are sufficient since faith alone justifies and love alone lives rightly." (Concerning the Ministry; LW 40:9). The spoken scriptures and proclaimed holy Word of God carry the fullness of Christ risen and the promises of forgiveness, life and salvation. They are sufficient. (cf: Dr. Gordon Lathrop re: Wengert statement)

To be certain, we yearn to share the sacrament and will rejoice when we are reunited in the eucharistic feast. I also am concerned that Holy Communion remain available for all the faithful, not only those with access to technology. This is a concern shared by several ELCA bishops, including Bishop Bill Tesch of the Northwestern MN Synod who pointed out, St. Paul's strong admonition to the church at Corinth after detecting divisions in the body of Christ over the proper understanding of the holy meal. (I Cor. 11: 17-34) (Tesch FAQ statement)

Bishop Bob Humprey helps with these thoughts by posing this: If only some of those who wish to participate in the Holy Eucharist, (perhaps the most communal part of the liturgy), are able to do so – and only if they have the technology and necessary elements available – isn't that an equity/justice issue? What provision can we now make for those who may wish to be included – but are unable to do so? And, in this time of restricted contact, we are unable to go to them. Therefore, I feel we should follow St. Paul's advice, "So, then, when you come together to eat, wait for one another." (I Corinthians 11:33)

St. Paul binds the Church's celebration of the Eucharist to this story of Jesus' self-giving love in a phrase that is very familiar to us, "For as often as you eat of this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (I Corinthians 11:26) The harder I press the Holy Scriptures and our liturgy to yield the purpose of celebrating the Eucharist, I find it is to tell the story of Jesus. To proclaim in visible, tangible form the mystery of faith, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."



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So, then what are we to say about these things?

As Bishop Kurt Kusserow points out: It is the very nature of the Church to tell this story. To embody this story. In all we do and say to point to Christ who pours himself out for others in love.

And if, for the moment, our responsible participation in society keeps us from gathering in Eucharistic celebrations, how then shall we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes? That, I think, is the right question. That, I think, leads us to keep our focus on the nature of the Church in this unfamiliar territory.

“How then shall we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes?” With words, of course. In direct telling of the story as the Holy Gospels do. In telling the story by connecting Jesus' life to our daily lives as preaching does. But also, in our own self-emptying as Church together. Our public proclamation of Christ is all the more effective if our disciplined care for others in society – yes, our love for others – is accompanied by some measure of self-emptying.

I am moved to think of the faithful members of our congregations, themselves deprived of the sacrament because of the restriction against large gatherings, who are still willing to volunteer in ministries of feeding in their communities as a way to embody the story of Jesus. It is certainly possible to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes through other means than the Eucharist only.

So, what then are we to say about these things? I want to say thank you! Thank you to each of you who I have seen step up and show the world what it means to love and serve your neighbor during these days of even being physically distant. Thank you for all the ways you continue to be generous in your time, talents, and treasures, even in the midst of these days. Thank you for your work of the kingdom in providing care, nurture, and formation for people in ways you may never imagined you would have to do.

What then are we to say about these things of these days in which we live? We say that nothing in all creation will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing! This is an Easter message that we will need to hear, proclaim, and be reminded of more and more in these days. May it be so. Amen.

+Bishop Kevin L. Strickland

Much of this letter is also based on other pastoral letters from Bishop Kurt Kusserow, Bishop Bill Tesch, and Bishop Bob Humphrey with thanks to all of them.