



ST. PAUL LUTHERAN CHURCH

The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod | Rev. Jeffrey Proctor

Friday, March 20, 2020

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The penitential season of Lent began on Ash Wednesday. In the Divine Service celebrated at St. Paul that evening, the following passage was read from the prophet Joel:

“Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants . . . Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep and say, “Spare Your people, O LORD, and make not Your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” – Joel 2:15-17

Christians gather. To be the Church is to be “the assembly of the firstborn” (Hebrews 12:23), those who have been called out of this world, called out of the darkness. Christians run toward, rather than flee from, the precious gifts of God in Word and Sacrament in the Divine Service. We gather together at the invitation of our Lord Jesus Christ to **“take the cup of salvation and call on the Name of the Lord”** (Psalm 116:13), to beg His mercy, and to offer Him our supplications, which rise to Him as fragrant incense (cf. Psalm 141:2; Revelation 8:3-4). For the Church to respond to danger and potential disaster by keeping distance from one another, or relinquishing the solemn assembly of the saints, is completely counterintuitive to both faith and love. And yet, pastors and congregations throughout our land have recently had to consider doing that very thing.

Following the Lenten midweek Divine Service this past Wednesday, the elders and I met to discuss the current threat of COVID-19 and corporate worship at St. Paul Lutheran Church. I’m sure all of you are now aware of the recommendations of President Trump and the CDC to meet in groups no larger than 10 people. This poses a serious difficulty to churches no matter what the size of their congregation. After deliberation and prayer, the Board of Elders and I have agreed on a course of action.

All activities outside of the Divine Service on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings have been suspended throughout at least the remainder of March. This includes Matins, Sunday School, Adult Bible Class, Confirmation Class, and other ancillary activities. There will be no coffee hour on Sunday morning after worship. The Divine Service will continue to be celebrated at its normal time on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings during Lent. We are currently not seeking to limit the number of worshipers at any of the services.

This decision was not made lightly, but will undoubtedly come as a surprise to many of you. It will most likely be met with strong feelings of disapproval by some, but I hope with joyful approval by others. We recognize the danger of the coronavirus and the risk especially to the elderly, of which a significant portion of St. Paul's membership is made up. However, the elders and I are convinced that we are not being negligent or irresponsible in our calling to be good neighbors and obedient citizens. Rather, we are simply seeking to live our lives as faithful Christians. While we certainly do not want to place anyone in harms way, neither do we want to deprive anyone of the benefit of receiving the Lord's gifts in the solemn assembly of the saints.

*****The following are points that I and the elders would like to stress to everyone during this time*****

- 1) Stay home if you feel sick, if you have been diagnosed with COVID-19 or any other illness, or if you feel anxious and uneasy about coming to church. This applies also to those who serve in ANY capacity at St. Paul. No one is forced to come to church.**

If any of the reasons listed above apply to you, please stay home. The St. Paul Lutheran Church website (<https://www.stpaulutheran-az.com>) has links to service bulletins, live-stream services, and archived sermons and services. Pray and worship with us via live-stream if you can't or don't want to come in person. The email this letter is attached to will also have direct links to those pages.

- 2) Contact Pastor Proctor if you would like him to bring the Holy Body and Blood of Christ to you at home. Also call him, your elder, or the church office if you need assistance buying groceries, picking up medications, getting to an appointment, etc.**

We are the body of Christ. The body cares for its members. When one member suffers, so does the entire body. In whatever way St. Paul can be of assistance at this time, please don't hesitate to reach out. Pastor Proctor's cell phone number is 260-494-7622. He will be happy to come and serve you Holy Communion in your home. The church office is 623-846-2228. If you don't know who your assigned elder is, get in touch with Pastor Proctor and he will help connect you.

- 3) There will be no meetings or classes outside of the Divine Service for the remainder of March.**

This was noted in a paragraph above, but I want to stress it again. This applies to Sunday School, Adult Bible Class, Confirmation Class, Matins, coffee hour, etc. The idea is to create some "social distance" for the time being.

*****The following is updated protocol for those who come for Holy Communion*****

- 1) Be aware that people may not want to shake hands or give hugs.**

The greeters will still be in place to welcome people to St. Paul Lutheran Church, but are instructed not to extend their arm for a handshake. I will still greet every one of you after the service, but will only shake a hand or give a hug upon invitation.

2) Spread out in the pews.

We have a fairly large sanctuary. There is a lot of available space even on a normal Sunday. There will probably be a lot more space during this COVID-19 threat. It is certainly fine for families to sit close together, but please give your neighbors in the pew a wide berth.

3) Spread out at the communion rail.

We want to provide extra space between communicants. So, for the time being, the number of people at the rail during Holy Communion will be limited to 8, 4 on the left and 4 on the right. Again, give your neighbor a wide berth.

4) Use hand sanitizer.

Please use it frequently. There is a bottle of hand sanitizer on the stand at the entrance to the sanctuary. Some people carry little bottles with them. The elders and worship assistants always use it before coming forward to help with Holy Communion. Pastor Proctor will apply some before he distributes the Body and Blood of Christ to each table of communicants.

5) Extra sanitary measures in preparing elements and vessels for Holy Communion.

St. Paul's Altar Guild already does a wonderful job in cleaning the vessels and linens and preparing the altar in a sanitary way. We have decided to implement an extra measure of sanitization. Guild members will use disposable gloves when preparing the elements and vessels. After each celebration of Holy Communion, all vessels will have a sanitizing solution applied to them after being washed in soapy warm water. This, of course, applies to the individual glasses as well. The administration of Holy Communion will remain the same.

This is a challenging time for everyone. We are all having to make adjustments, some minor and some major. In addition to the list of things above, and most importantly, "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Pray for yourself and your family. Pray for the members of St. Paul Lutheran Church and for me. Pray for the president and all in authority. Pray for police officers, firefighters, paramedics, and other emergency workers. Pray for doctors and nurses. Pray for those who have contracted this disease. In short, make supplication to the Lord for all people. And pray that His deliverance of us from this dreaded pestilence would be swift and complete. The Lord has promised never to leave us or forsake us. We give Him thanks and proclaim His goodness even in the midst of strife and uncertainty.

"O give thanks unto the Lord; for He is good . . . and His mercy endureth for ever."—Psalm 118:1

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit ✠ be with you all.

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Jeff Proctor