A Pastoral Letter to the Diocese of Alaska from Bishop Lattime

March 13, 2020

My Beloved in Christ,

Times of crisis seem to change once solid ground into sinking sand under our feet. Where we once felt secure and certain, a crisis like the CORVID-19 pandemic throws the whole world into turmoil. How are we to respond? What are we to do? How do I protect myself and my family? And how do I help my community? The way forward becomes unclear.

In times of crisis, it is important to remember the gift of our faith and the fact that even in the swift and changing landscape that surrounds us, we are standing on solid ground when we stand with Our Lord. Psalm 23 reminds us that even when we walk in the valley of shadows, we shall fear no evil for God is with us.

These are shadow times, and God is with us.

In a crisis, in the face of human frailty, on the thresholds of suffering and fear, it is even more important for the church to be who it is called to be: the Body of Christ. As the Body of Christ, we are called to be present and supportive of one another in the darkness; but crisis can quickly convert us from a beloved community that supports one another, to a scattered flock running in fear. Now more than ever, we should strive towards our higher calling to abide in Christ, to abide together, and to reach out in love to those who are sitting and suffering in darkness.

As the information about COVID-19 evolves, I remain convinced that our ministry and response must conform to accurate scientific and medical data. Therefore, though we stand on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ and His love and we remain committed to the ministry of neighborly love that He calls us to engage, the realities of COVID-19 require us to be adaptive and responsive in how we care for both the spiritual and physical health of our communities.

Now we are seeing public institutions, colleges, schools, sporting events, and other public gatherings canceled. I learned just yesterday that the University of Alaska has extended spring break and shifted to an on-line only format until the end of March. Some institutions and municipalities have suggested canceling any non-essential gatherings greater than a certain number. The numbers, however, are inconsistent—some places greater than 250 individuals, other places the limit is 25.
Perhaps more significant, some of my colleague bishops in the Episcopal Church have directed that congregations suspend public worship in their dioceses. The Presiding Bishop issued a statement offering pastoral support of those bishops who choose to direct a “fast from public worship” in this season (the PB lacks the authority to direct the suspension of worship in any diocese). There is no consistency in the Episcopal Church, however, on the matter of suspending public worship; larger dioceses (NY, Long Island, Los Angeles, San Diego, e.g.) have not suspended public worship, while much smaller dioceses have.

Given the extraordinary variety of communities and congregations in the Diocese of Alaska, I am not directing congregations in the Diocese of Alaska to suspend public worship.

Recognizing the essential need that many have to gather in worship within their community of faith—especially in times of crisis and great worry, and for whom online or virtual worship is not available, I am supporting the decisions that our individual communities make with respect to public worship. Some congregations may discern that the risks to the most vulnerable are too great and will make the difficult choice to suspend their gatherings. Others may decide to suspend Holy Communion and offer Morning Prayer as an alternative. For many of our congregations, Morning Prayer is the standard for public worship anyway. Given the vast differences in resources, parish size, and community pastoral needs, I am affirming that our communities have the freedom they need to choose how best to adapt their public worship needs. At the same time, I urge all our congregations to make provisions for the on-going spiritual needs and Christian life of their people. We cannot suspend our ministry of neighborly love, prayer, and worship even if we suspend our usual ways of gathering. Here I am grateful for the creativity of our people and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

For those communities that will continue to offer Public Worship, I insist that every precaution be made to mitigate risk of transmission. Our goal is to “flatten the curve” of transmission. This means to spread out the inevitable number of cases of infection over a longer period. While much remains unknown about COVID-19, and we are learning more every day, it has been established that a few best practices will greatly reduce the risk of transmission, namely: diligent hand hygiene by washing hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds (the time it takes to sing the Doxology); complete avoidance of touching your face, eyes, and mouth; maintaining a distance of 6 feet from individuals not in your household; self-quarantine of “at risk” individuals and those 65 years or older; and self-isolation if you are feeling sick. Further, I have urged the clergy to begin taking their temperature every morning (mine was 98.4 today). If you are feeling sick, or if your temperature is 99.5 or higher, you should isolate yourself.

With respect to Holy Communion, in those parishes that will continue to offer Holy Communion, it has been established over 2,000 years of practice that receiving the sacrament—including the Common Cup presents a very low risk of disease transmission. Nevertheless, I assure all the faithful that the benefits of Holy Communion are fully received if Communion is received by Bread alone. Moreover, the benefits of Holy Communion are also received if a person comes forward in faith desiring Communion but for reason of health or infirmity is unable to receive either the bread or the wine (“at risk” is a worthy health reason).

In communities that continue to offer public worship, these precautions shall be followed.
Even in congregations that continue to offer public worship, nonessential meetings or gatherings should be canceled or postponed. However, please give very careful consideration before closing your doors to meetings like AA or NA. These are essential public gatherings.

Finally, we do well to remember that one of Jesus' messages was "FEAR NOT." Faith, hope, and prayer are gifts that we can share to help deal with fear--let us NOT contribute to the anxiety that is growing.

And let our love of neighbor keep all things in perspective.

This past week, as the stock market was diving and the news cycle continued to spin stories of further quarantines—even entire countries, growing numbers of cases of COVID-19, cancelations of professional sporting events—even March Madness, someone near to me said: "this must be the end of days."

That comment was made in jest; but it brings to light a reality that we might do well to consider. I am certain that to a poor young mother who lives with the daily worry that her child will contract malaria, ebola, tuberculosis or die from dehydration from a waterborne disease; who lives on less than a dollar a day; and may even be searching daily for political safety and refuge from violence and war; I'm sure that young mother does NOT see a drop in the stock market, quarantined cruise ships or countries, the cancelation of professional sporting events, and the threat of a pandemic with a 2-3% fatality as the "End of Days." For her it was just another day.

Pray for courage, pray for healing, wash your hands, remember we are in this together, love your neighbor as yourself.

In the Hope, Way, and Life of Jesus Christ,

(The Rt. Rev.) Mark Lattime
8th Bishop of Alaska