

A SOMBER REFLECTION ON THE EMERGENCY ORDER OF WISCONSIN'S GOVERNOR TO PROHIBIT OUR WORSHIP SERVICES.

On March 17th at the direction of Governor Evers, Wisconsin prohibited gatherings of 10 or more people as part of its response to the COVID-19 outbreak. This essentially precludes our worship services and public proclamations of the Gospel as we have always done them under threat of penalty by the civil authorities. Yes, I get it, that this is an enormous crisis! I wish he had asked us to do all that we could and not ordered. That step went too far. I protest it and offer my considerations on the crisis which faces all of us.

First, those of you who know me know that although this is a “somber” reflection, my feeling is that even in the most terrible of times, it is helpful (and sometimes all we can do) to find something at which we can laugh. My family is much better connected to social media than I am and have shared some wondrously humorous memes in the last few days. Keep those coming. I also had to snicker at the Wisconsin comedian who proposed that Wisconsinites practice “social distancing” by wearing a Bears jersey which should keep everyone away. Do not lose your sense of humor.

Certain other essential perspectives about this crisis should be stated up-front.

Caring for Each Other in the Crisis

Galatians 6 tells us to “. . . do good to everyone but especially to those who are of the household of faith.” The Lord may give us opportunity to help our neighbors under the duress of this crisis, but I believe we are especially called to help our fellow church members – those of our household of faith. I have tried to share with our seniors and at-risk members that we commit to support them as they have any needs. I affirm again, if you are a member of Hope Lutheran Church and you find yourself with any problems or shortfalls during this thing, PLEASE CALL ME! Many of us stand by to do whatever is in our power to help you.

Prayer

A refuge of first resort is in the great privilege and power of prayer. Let us pray for all of our brothers and sisters in the church, for our families, for our neighbors, for our country, for those in authority making difficult decisions, for those who care for others in hospitals and elsewhere, and for those at work to combat the threat of this pandemic.

Peace

Our peace is with God because of Jesus Christ. No one and nothing can rob us of this inner peace. Do not let your hearts be troubled. We are citizens of a different kingdom and when we see this life fragment, whether it is our health or our wealth, our security or our surety, it only serves to help us embrace the life to come.

Remembering What Is Central to Our Existence as a Church

Here is where the conflict has entered. The world around us is contented with churches that focus upon “helping the community,” “caring for others,” and “meeting needs of people.” An anthropocentric view of the church comports very well with the works-righteousness/self-justification behind both secularism and popular religion. No one verbalizes it but the message is deafening – “You be a nice church now of nice people and do nice things for others while we handle everything that is really important.”

No! Our central mission, our very existence is grounded in the message that this world is passing away. There is another world, another kingdom, another King, which demands priority over everything else.

We Don't Diminish the Threat – But It Is Overshadowed By Something Greater

I am sure that Governor Evers, in his own mind, seeks to do a good thing. From his perspective, prohibiting our regular worship services is a most reasonable measure to reduce social contact and slow the spread of the virus. He is trying to save lives and prevent deaths. I feel great empathy toward him for the immense challenge with which he is tasked. What he does not understand is that our regular service of worship is irreducibly central to some of us. Our worship is not just another “mass gathering” as the prohibition describes it. It is bound up in our view that life and death are in fact less important than what happens and what is proclaimed in that worship.

Let me frame this from another angle. The emergency order allows for multiple exceptions to the prohibitions on having 10 or more people together. These include hospitals, day care centers, grocery stores, manufacturing facilities, and courtrooms. They even include Wisconsin legislature, airports, and polling places! (Are you kidding me?) What he is saying is that the needs for healthcare, food, and travel are important enough that the prohibition should not apply there. I agree: But he betrays his underlying conviction in that when it comes to free exercise of religion, namely our worship of the One Who holds life and death in His hands – that is NOT important enough – not even as important as the other exemptions. Well, it IS that important to some of us!

I am convinced that some years from now, when this crisis has passed, books will be written and research will explore how people handled the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of those judgments may not be pleasant. Questions have already begun to surface. In an article I read the next day, Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson was pressed in an interview about some of his concerns at government measures and the effects these might have on our economy. While he struggled to articulate it, his point seemed clear to me; that government response has taken on a life of its own. Overreach seems inevitable when the sociological dynamic at work is for each Governor to preclude any charges in the future that he/she did not do enough. At the time of this writing, there is tension in New York City between Mayor DeBlasio who is threatening a shelter-in-place order and Governor Cuomo claiming such orders can only come from the state. The tensions have raised discussions about the extent that government can curtail civil liberties during emergencies.

Besides the economy and other civil liberties, I look for someone to publicly question the Wisconsin governor's prohibition of our free exercise of religion. I listened to a conference call of pastors after the prohibition was made. Some discussed how they would comply by use of various media alternatives, but no one expressed any outrage about the prohibition. Even our Synod President (whom I deeply respect and admire) sees the issue as a matter of the 4th commandment (obey the authorities) rather than the first amendment (the right to worship). He didn't convince me. The effect is the same. Are someone's rights not infringed as long as such was not the intent of the person who infringed upon them?

But this is not about “rights” for me: It is a matter of conscience. We at Hope have already encouraged our attendees to consider their risk status, the danger they may pose to others if they become infected, and all their personal variables. The full expectation was that the vast majority would make the right decision by suspending church attendance: But there are a small number for whom missing church is as bad a thing as getting the virus. It is one thing for me as pastor to legitimize every possible exit ramp for our people on the road to church attendance during this crisis. I will do that. It is another thing

altogether to close the doors of the church and simply say that public worship will not be conducted. That would go against my conscience: Nevertheless, I was resigned to do just that rather than put any of my sheep in a precarious situation.

God changed that. After conversations with two of my people who still wanted very much to meet for worship, I was reduced to tears. These are not stupid people who do not take the enormous risks seriously. These are not ignorant people who do not comprehend the vast medical data released to us about how this thing spreads and the constraints on civil authorities to curtail it before it surpasses healthcare provider capacities. These are not apathetic people who do not deeply love their own families or would thoughtlessly expose them to danger. These are people who as a matter of conscience, cannot understand subordinating the message of eternal life and eternal death to concerns about temporary life and temporary death. Worship service is the one thing that must go forward.

Our Plan

In consultation with the Elders, we selected the following course of action. Everything at church is cancelled except Sunday worship. It will still take place in abbreviated form. Our previous mitigation factors are still in place (no handshakes, disinfection of the church before each service, etc.) except that there will be no Holy Communion. The service will be live-streamed on our facebook page so that those at home can participate. All of our members and friends are reminded of the prohibition and the reasons why, in good faith, the governor made it. Any seniors or people with health problems, anyone who will come into contact with such where the virus might be spread to them, or anyone who will come into contact with someone who will come into contact . . . (so pretty much everybody) has good cause to watch from home. They are not breaking the 3rd commandment. They are not lesser Christians. They are fully beloved and valued members of the Body of Christ at Hope Lutheran.

If, however, there are any who feel compelled to worship publicly, the doors are open. We expect that this number will remain below the “mass gathering” requirement of under 10. If we go over 10, I will be the first to surrender myself to the Governor’s storm troopers when they burst through the door; each worshipper will have to accept any consequences.

100% of us will die. Corona Virus will do nothing to increase that percentage. How we manage life and death and the words of Christ to us in this time will still be more important a million years from now. During this present crisis, many Lutherans have reviewed the story of Martin Luther’s experience when the plague broke out in his home town of Wittenberg in 1527. He chose to remain there and continue to minister. Would he have left if the Prince had ordered him? All other church functions at Hope are cancelled right now, but I have decided that on Sunday mornings, I need to be right here.

Two Hard Questions

For some, it will not make sense that anyone needs to meet at the church when we have so many options available to us using modern media. Perhaps they are right. We will use the live-streaming to make the service available to our brothers and sisters at home. In the end, if technology provided a satisfactory answer, than do we not have to ask why any church should resume meeting in person once this crisis is over rather than just doing online worship?

I also wrestle with this horrifying thought. If the gathering of a few souls at church should be discovered as the venue for the virus to spread to some of our own people (rather than their getting it at the grocery store or the doctors office), those older than me or in poorer health are more likely to suffer. God knows I would gladly prefer to be the one who dies rather than any of our precious sheep; but in all

likelihood, it would be someone else. The devil torments my conscience with this. What fortifies me is the reminder that according to the office of the keys, I sometimes tell people that they are condemned. How do I live with that? We must follow our conscience and convictions about the truth. We cannot modify them at the thought of terrible outcomes, but we commend them to God who loves us in Christ though we are sometimes sheep to be slaughtered by tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword (Rom 8:35,36). My prayers for God's protection of our flock at Hope are especially acute right now, but at the end of prayer, I am compelled to surrender the flock from my hands into Christ's hands – as we all must do eventually with everyone that we love.

Psalm 39⁴ O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting I am!

⁵ Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.

Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! *Selah*

⁶ Surely a man goes about as a shadow!

Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!

⁷ And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?

My hope is in you.