

Dear Saints at Glory of Christ,

“... that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” (Luke 1:74-75)

As we watch the coverage about COVID-19 from all around the world, it is easy to succumb to panic and fear. But we are Christ’s Church, and we are called to fear, love and trust in our Lord above wars, natural disasters, persecution, and epidemics. We gather in faith, not fear. Nevertheless, we are also called to love our neighbor as ourselves, so loving our neighbor in times like these entails taking precautions that will help protect others as best we can.

Pastor Krueger and I are not infectious disease experts, nor do we pretend to be. We are your pastors, and as such, we will begin by addressing matters of spiritual care. After that, we will outline some of the concrete ways we can love our neighbor through some practical precautions.

Over the past century, our nation has done a remarkable job decreasing the number and scope of deadly epidemics that, in prior times, would have claimed the lives of thousands or even millions. But COVID-19 reminds us of the grim reality that we still live outside of Eden. The fall has shattered our world, and sin is a pandemic that has a 100% mortality rate.

Through faith in His saving work, Christ has undone the long-term effects of this disastrous plague of sin and death, even if many of the short-term effects remain. We receive this vital gift of life through the Word and Sacraments every Sunday morning. During times of fear and uncertainty, we need to be strengthened in our faith more than ever. There are many events and activities in the church that can be changed or canceled for the sake of precaution, but we cannot forsake meeting together and receiving the gifts of Christ that we so desperately need.

There has been some concern that Holy Communion may pose a health risk, and some churches have even ceased giving the Sacrament. The early Christians called the Lord’s Supper “the medicine of immortality and the antidote against death.” This does not mean that the Lord’s Supper is some kind of voodoo cure for COVID-19 or any other ailments that you have. Our Lord’s flesh and blood *is* a cure to the transgression that infects us. Just as your Small Catechism reminds you, it gives you *life* and *salvation*. In short, we need the Sacrament more than any medicine that our labs can produce. And when we step up to the rail, we trust our Lord that it will be for our good. This truth is articulated well in the third verse of “What God Ordains is Always Good.”

*What God ordains is always good: His loving thought attends me
No poison can be in the cup that my physician sends me.
My God is true;
Each morning new I trust His grace unending
My life to Him commending.*

This trust does not, however, preclude vigilance. Your pastors and elders will redouble the sanitary procedures we already follow: meticulous washing of hands (and now the use of hand sanitizer before the Communion and after each table is dismissed), meticulous washing of all sacred vessels. We will continue the use of the common cup, which our Lord Himself used, but we will not burden anyone’s conscience regarding the use of it.

The most recent guidelines from the civil authorities at the CDC in response to COVID-19 provide us the opportunity to serve one another in very concrete ways.

The recommendations say that all older Americans (60+), those with chronic health conditions, and those who have compromised immune systems are at “higher risk.” The CDC instructs all such people as follows:

- Stay at home as much as possible.
- Make sure you have access to several weeks of medications and supplies in case you need to stay home for prolonged periods of time.
- When you go out in public, keep away from others who are sick, limit close contact and wash your hands often.
- Avoid crowds.
- Stay up to date on CDC Travel Health Notices.

Even if you are not part of the “high risk” category, the CDC recommends these common-sense precautions:

- Frequently wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not readily available use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or use the inside of your elbow.
- Clean frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- Stay home when sick.

Please take special note of this last recommendation. If you are not feeling well, for the sake of your neighbor, **please stay home and get better.**

At our church, we will take the following additional precautions:

- The pastors will refrain from shaking hands.
- The offering plates will not be passed. They will be placed on the tables in the back of the church.
- We will suspend serving snacks on Sunday mornings as well as Lenten meals on Wednesdays.

These precautions are temporary, of course. But with the nature of this outbreak, we cannot say for certain when they will end.

We understand that some may feel compelled to absent themselves from church or are instructed to do so by a doctor. If this is the case, please contact your pastors immediately so that arrangements can be made for your pastoral care. If you do need to miss church, remember that sermons are posted on the church website within a day or two.

Might all these actions end up being overly cautious? Perhaps. But we will only know that in hindsight. But for the sake of our neighbor, we feel that it would be better to be overly cautious rather than insufficiently so. There is much that we can lay aside for the sake of precaution so that we can continue to receive the Word and Sacraments—the one thing we cannot lay aside.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has created much fear and uncertainty about life. But Saint Paul reminds us that as a Christian, “your life is hidden with Christ in God.” And if your life is hidden with Christ, we do not need to fear anything but are free to act in all wisdom and boldness as we worship our Lord and serve our neighbor.

Lenten peace,

Pastor Johnson and Pastor Krueger