

Grace to you and peace from God our heavenly Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

St. Paul says, *“For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.”* Romans 14:8-9 ESV

Are we doing the right thing? By closing the doors of the church today, in keeping with the COVID19 protocols, are we being faithful to God or are we acting out of our own scared tendency for self-preservation? Are we trusting God?

To be honest, I tried to come up with a solution that would still allow us to meet today to be divinely served by God in Word and Sacrament like we would any other Sunday. But today is not like any other Sunday. This is a new world for us. Many of us have dealt with natural disasters such as tornadoes, hurricanes, and wildfires. But, by-and-large, we are not accustomed to dealing with life in the midst of a pandemic.

Historically though, we are not the first Christians to deal with just such an occurrence of a virulent pathogen. From the Introduction to Luther's *Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague*:

The Black Death, which from 1347 to 1350 swept out of China or India to the Crimea and thence to Europe and as far as Iceland, killed one-fourth of the population of Europe.... Four great epidemics swept Germany in the fifteenth century and further ones occurred in the sixteenth.... On August 2, 1527, this dread plague struck Wittenberg. Fearing for the safety of Luther and the other professors at the university, Elector John, on August 10, ordered Luther to leave for Jena.... Unmoved by the elector's letter or by the pleas of his

friends, Luther, along with Bugenhagen, stayed to minister to the sick and frightened people.¹

Of course Wittenberg was not the only European town infected with and affected by the bubonic plague. Rev. Dr. Johann Hess, a Lutheran pastor in Breslau, Silesia (modern day Wroclaw, Poland) wrote to Luther asking him if it is proper for a Christian to flee from such a deadly peril. Luther responded with a fourteen page reply which was printed and distributed publicly. I will (or have by the time you read this) put an electronic copy of Luther's reply on our webpage and Facebook page if you would like to read it yourself.

Ultimately, Luther says that fleeing the bubonic plague is not a sin so long as you are not forsaking your duty to your neighbor. So for Luther, he felt that he must stay in Wittenberg and minister the sick and dying. However he also points out that if there are enough clergy to take care of the flock then those who are non-essential, so-to-speak, may leave a town in good conscience. But if a pastor, mayor, sherriff, physician or other public servant flees and leaves his duty unattended then he is guilty because he did not love his neighbor but shirked his God given responsibility.

What I find particularly interesting is what Luther has to say about the person who tempts God by his lack of using his intelligence and taking precautions to lessen the spread of the disease. Of these Luther states:

They are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; **they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague.** But lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. They say that it is God's punishment; if he wants to protect them he can do so without medicines or

¹ Luther's Works (AE) 43, pg. 115

our carefulness. This is not trusting God but tempting him. God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health.

If one makes no use of intelligence or medicine when he could do so without detriment to his neighbor, such a person injures his body... It is even more shameful for a person to pay no heed to his own body and to fail to protect it against the plague the best he is able, **and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive** if he had taken care of his body as he should have. He is thus responsible before God for his neighbor's death and is a murderer many times over.²

As much as I desire to meet with all y'all for the divine service today, the Fifth Commandment pricked my conscience. Hopefully you remember it; You shall not murder. And of course its explanation; "*What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need."³

So dear friends, take comfort on this Fourth Sunday of Lent 2020. Even though we are not physically together today to receive God's grace through the ministry of Word and Sacrament, we do so out of love for one another neither hurting nor harming but rather supporting each other.

Lord grant this to us all. Amen.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

² Ibid pg 131 emphasis mine

³ SC Ten Commandments