



## Northeastern Minnesota Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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### Pastoral Letter, Bishop Thomas M. Aitken April 2, 2020

Dear Synod,

This upcoming week-end marks the beginning of Holy Week with Palm/Passion Sunday. I write to share some encouragement and guidance as we enter it and look towards Easter. Your synod staff remains committed to working faithfully from home to help keep us all connected and given resources during this deadly COVID-19 pandemic. We are in regular communication with each other. I shared with our Staff yesterday at our ZOOM meeting, that in my heart and mind three significant things rise to the surface these days for me:

- 1-The grief of what we are losing
- 2-The sad certainty of many more deaths, and the uncertainty of how long this will go on
- 3- A mix of wonder and certain hope for where we might be headed by God's grace

#### **We can and should lament.**

Beckie and I find ourselves talking much more these days about the losses we feel; friends who are ill, friends who have died, our children and grandchildren half way around the world. I also lament not being out each Sunday in your congregations preaching the gospel and laughing and talking to you in real time instead of on miniature little squares on a zoom screen – though I am grateful at least for that. I am weary, like you, that there are tragedies that simply are part of nature, a slice of life that we can't control. It is good to name this, to let tears flow, to take time especially as we are staying at home to talk with others and pray about our fears and sadness. We divide the sorrow and share it. Scripture is filled with examples of this.

#### **We can and are in fact *empowered*, to trust Jesus.**

Trust is the way Martin Luther described what faith really is. He reminds us that even trusting God is not something we have to manufacture – it is the gift from God. Trust is not wishful thinking. It is a power that grants us a sure and certain hope in God and in the future, even in the midst of deadly things happening all around us. Lean into and use that gift of trust within you. Take baby steps, trust will come and will uphold you.

#### **Worship and Holy Communion**

With regard to Holy Communion, my earlier recommendation remains the same – which is that we refrain from sharing the sacrament of Holy Communion during this “stay at home” mandate until it is safe to gather in person again. This remains a faithful action during this time. While we do that, I have also urged us to focus on and deeply experience Christ's presence as the Word of God proclaimed in our pastor's sermons each week with new intentionality and eagerness. I know there are various viewpoints about virtual communion, drive-by Communion, drive-in Communion, and Household Communion that are part of Facebook and other media

conversations. And I understand that there is no perfect answer, that there may be truth in several takes on this, but there are also problems with these options, including inequitable distribution of methods that allow people to participate. Time may change things for our worship practice down the road, but for now, I urge you to fast from Communion, speak more intentionally the promise of Christ to each other, focus on the promises of our baptism where we were joined to Christ forever, trust the work of the Holy Spirit in creating the mind and heart of Christ in us every day, and yes, finally, reach out in faithful service to your neighbor – in safe ways – to experience Christ’s presence with us.

**Lawyers, CPA’s, Nurses, Teachers etc....**

This is the time for you to step up and use your particular God-given calling to help your congregations. Let the rostered ministers and worship leaders lead the worship life of your congregations, and Rostered Ministers please use the expertise of your congregational members to do their work in your congregations. I am working with our Synod Attorney to help answer some governmental benefits for congregations. This is what is meant by the Priesthood of All Believers.

I found the words to ***THIS EASTER CELEBRATION***, written by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, 2020 on one of the numerous media offerings to be helpful for me:

**3<sup>rd</sup> verse**

In all the grief and suffering, may we remember well:  
Christ suffered crucifixion and faced the powers of hell.  
Each Easter bears the promise; Christ rose that glorious day:  
Now nothing in creation can keep your love away.

**4<sup>th</sup> verse**

We thank you that on Easter, your church is blessed to be  
a scattered, faithful body that’s doing ministry;  
In homes and in the places - of help and healing too,  
We live the Easter message by gladly serving you.

In Jesus Christ, the Word, presence, and promise of God

+Bishop Thomas Aitken