



When I am afraid, I put my trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? (Psalm 56:3-4 ESV)

April 3rd, 2020

Re: Holy Communion and Coronavirus

Dear Church Family in the Faith,

I have said that I would address the topic of Holy Communion more in-depth, as I know many of our people are thinking and wondering about it, and so this is my attempt to do so. Let me say right up front that if anything causes more questions or concerns, please do not let this letter or anything else be the last we speak of it. Please contact me and I would be happy to talk with you more.

What is most obvious is that the global coronavirus pandemic is disrupting every facet of our lives, including the life of the Church. And it is not just locally, or nationally, but rather billions of Christians around the globe are adjusting to a new reality. And so, I thought I would attempt to summarize a lot of information that I have heard and read, specifically in regard to Holy Communion, and write it in a way that I hope is helpful to you.

Very quickly, and only a few weeks ago, almost all churches decided to suspend in-person services in an attempt to protect and serve one another's physical well-being and to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 disease. And this was good and right, especially as we listen to and obey the directions we are receiving from our government. However, it did also bring hardship. It is a hardship not to be meeting together and encouraging one another in Christian fellowship (Hebrews 10:25). It is a hardship not to gather on the Lord's Day to hear His Word. It is a hardship not to be physically present in each other's lives as we are used to doing.

All Christians are facing those same hardships. However, when we consider the various theological convictions we have when it comes to the Sacraments, you could say that Lutherans, as well as some other denominations, might be uniquely aware of another hardship that we are currently facing. You see, Lutherans believe that in the Lord's Supper we truly receive the body and blood of Jesus in, with, and under the bread and wine, as Jesus said, "Take, eat; this is my body... drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood," for "the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28). When we cannot gather as the Church, and therefore are not physically eating the bread and drinking the wine in the Lord's Supper, we also cannot receive this particular means of grace and its blessings. Not all Christians have this same

understanding of the Lord's Supper, and therefore may not be as particularly troubled by that fact. But we are aware of it as a true loss that we are currently suffering.

So then, what are we to think? Well, several things can be said. First, we would do well to recognize that we are not the first Christians in history to face this kind of hardship. During many different time periods—early colonial times, westward expansion of America, the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919, Christianity under the Soviet Union, and many more instances—Christians were without regular Word and Sacrament ministry for long periods of time. In my recent Bible Study on 1 Peter, I even discussed times when the Church has been in some form of exile, like Christians in the Roman Empire, or going all the back to the Israelite exile in Babylon. God is faithful to keep and sustain His people during such times, and Christians recognize that their exile will come to an end in the Lord's timing, when they will be able to return to the regular and salutary practices of the Church. History helps us put some of this into perspective.

Also, we have been cautioned by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's own *Commission on Theology and Church Relations* (CTCR, the group that helps explain our theological positions in the LCMS) to avoid anything that would compromise the assurance that the Lord's Supper delivers, or that would lead people away from the Sacrament itself. For instance, video-streaming the consecration, with words spoken by the pastor remotely over bread and wine in members' homes, or having Elders home-deliver consecrated bread and wine, would seem to go against the teaching of “doing this”—celebrating the Lord's Supper—as Jesus instructed us to do and as is taught in the Scriptures. It may even cause some to wonder if it was effective. Other novel ways of celebrating the Lord's Supper to “get around” the gathering limitations we have right now are popping up. Again, we are warned to avoid such things, so that the purpose for the meal, which is the forgiveness of sins, and the assurance we have through it, are not compromised in any way.

So, what are we to do? Let me quote the document put out by the CTCR on March 20th: “*As great as the hardship is when we cannot receive Christ's body and blood, the hardship ought not be 'resolved' in ways that promise an uncertain 'sacrament' without the absolute assurance that Christ intends. It is better humbly and repentantly to ask the Lord for the regular administration of the Sacrament of the Altar to be restored to us, together with an end to the 'deadly pestilence' that is killing thousands of souls who are precious to God, their Creator (see Psalm 91; Jonah 4:11)*” [emphasis added].

We can also view this time as a time of fasting. There can be great benefit from things that the Lord causes us to fast from, even if we find ourselves fasting from good things, like Holy Communion. We can spend more time thinking and praying about it. We can consider ways that we might have been underappreciating this particular gift from God, so that when we can partake of it again, we will do so even more rightly. We can long for the day when we will be able to receive communion regularly, as well as being together as the communion of saints, gathered in the house of God. To be cautiously clear, this is not an argument that it's “okay”

when someone voluntarily chooses not to come to church and receive communion on a regular basis. We are simply recognizing the uniqueness of the particular time we are in.

What's more, we take comfort during this time in another important Lutheran doctrine, regarding God's Word. Lutherans believe that God's Word is living and active (Hebrews 4:12) and does not return to God void without accomplishing exactly what God intends (Isaiah 55:11). His Word is doing more than just relaying information to your brain. It is, in fact, God's power at work in your life. For instance, when God's Word says, "Your sins are forgiven," your sins are actually forgiven. It also is a means of grace. This Word IS appropriate to send out electronically, written, in-person, and by whatever means we are able to proclaim the Gospel to the world. We can be confident that we will be sustained and strengthened by God's Word when it comes to us in digital or written form. That's why I have taken to YouTube to help regularly deliver God's Word to our congregation, which is also reaching many others who happen to be tuning in.

Finally, as we have said, this is only temporary. We have decided as a church to suspend regular church services until at least May. We are also currently obeying Michigan's "Stay Home, Stay Safe" executive order, which for now is set to end after Monday, April 13th. We will have to see if that executive order will be extended in any way. Should churches be provided some means to safely gather following the expiration of "Stay Home, Stay Safe," it would be my desire to find a way to administer communion to members. We would do so in the church sanctuary, likely with a shortened service, with however many people we are allowed (e.g. no more than 10 including the pastor, etc.). That will be something the Elders and I will make a decision about when the time comes, and we would communicate that to everybody when we do.

I pray that this summary of my thoughts and encouragements regarding our church and the Lord's Supper is helpful to you. I will reiterate what I said at the beginning: if you have any questions or concerns, please reach out, and I would happy to speak with you.

In Christ's Everlasting Mercy and Grace,

Pastor Joe Polzin

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