March 15, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace and peace to you. A great deal has happened in the past few days to challenge many of our conceptions. It is ironic that this Lenten season of reflection, repentance, and focus on transformation should coincide with a major transformation in how our society operates at every level. This past week’s movement from national complacency, to the recognition that we are facing an emergency situation such has not been seen in over a century, has been accompanied by major upheavals to both our accustomed routines and our anxiety levels.

With this letter, I wish to share with you both the challenges and the opportunities (yes, there are some!) presented by the spread of the novel coronavirus. One of the glories of our faith is the way that it acknowledges that our “souls” are the unity of body and spirit; mundane and transcendent. In any situation, we must respond to both because God cherishes both. We see this most explicitly in Christ himself, who identifies with us as the Word made flesh. This is therefore a very good time for all of us to remember Jesus’ most common tag-line: *“fear not, and follow me.”*

It has been suggested that COVID 19 is a foreign threat, and indeed it is: it is foreign to *every* single human being regardless of who or where they are. Disease respects neither our persons nor our self-imposed boundaries, and are truly “equal opportunity.” For this reason, we are presented with a choice both individually and as a society: either to let fear, ignorance and a “me-first” mentality overwhelm our compassion or to find creative ways to up our game and care for one another even if not always face to face.

The present COVID 19 pandemic can be likened to a “Black Swan” event. Before the discovery of Australia, everyone in Europe was convinced that all swans were white, because that was all that they had ever observed. Then that certainty was upended by the sighting of black swans “down under.” The significance of this story is that our knowledge is fragile and incomplete, and a single unpredictable event can invalidate a long history of what we assume to be true. One such example would be the events of 9/11, which were inconceivable on 9/10.

When you stop and deeply reflect upon it, what is life but the cumulative effect of black swans that poke their beaks into our view of ourselves and the world? COVID 19 is simply the latest to do so. Black swans hold a mirror up to us and force us to ask very basic things about our mortality, our view of where God may be in it, and our responsibility to one another. Will we like who we see when we look in that mirror?

In responding to the current situation, the imperative to “first do no harm,” is equally applicable to the realms of faith and medicine. While only a few cases have been confirmed in the metro region as I write this, one must assume that there are more (perhaps many more) cases which have not been detected due to the prior lack of diagnostic testing. No one really knows at this point, but what is certain is that, without intervention, diseases multiply exponentially; that is, initial small numbers become large numbers very quickly. This is why we have seen such dramatic responses all over the country, and why we no longer have the luxury of continuing with “business as usual.”

Your Session has adopted a plan of governance and decision-making which temporarily delegates authority to me to serve as chief contact person for information and for general operations. I have been following this epidemiological situation closely for weeks, and have been in contact with a variety of officials in order to formulate an appropriate mix of isolation (cancelling events) and outreach. Because of the high-risk profile of our membership, due to age and/or underlying health conditions, a cautious and careful response is warranted.

***For this reason, all community and worship gatherings are suspended until further notice, effective March 15, 2020. The only two exceptions are for vital social services such as Alcoholics Anonymous and the SHIM Food Bank, both of which will adopt heightened precautions. I will review the rapidly changing situation with Session on a regular basis to determine when activities may resume.***

I further urge you to keep updated on developments by attending to official notices and *reliable* sources of information such as the WHO, CDC, NIH or FDA. I suggest that you either avoid, or at least cross-reference, any other information with these primary sources since there is so much misinformation out there. Likewise, beware of scams that are springing up left and right. There are no potions, elixirs, IV treatments or silver solutions that are of any use whatever with COVID 19 (although they can quite efficiently part you from your money).

In the meantime, I will be working with church officers and local authorities to heighten communication of needs and concerns within both our faith community and our surrounding environment. In this regard, I was recently inspired by a story from Oregon, recounted in the British newspaper *(The Guardian),* about a woman who went to a grocery store. As she was crossing the parking lot, she heard someone yell to her.

Going toward the source of the sound, she found that it was an elderly woman and her husband; both of whom were too afraid of infection to get out of their car and enter the store. Tearfully, the older woman cracked the car window and held out a $100 bill and a piece of paper, asking the younger woman to get what was on their list for them. She not only did so, but placed the groceries in the elder couple’s trunk and gave them the itemized receipt and change that was due. When this is all over, that’s the kind of reflection I’d like to see in a mirror.

Remember, we are all in this rapidly evolving situation *together*. Even though we may see only dimly into the mirror of what will come, it is in the seemingly ordinary acts of compassion and service that we render one another that we behold more and more the image of our Lord reflected back at us. You can be a hero of faith simply by washing your hands, and a faithful servant by calling your neighbor to check on their needs and allay their fears and loneliness.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely: and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dr. Bob