

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Both the CDC and now, our federal, state, and local government, have recommended all of us to do our part to help curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus by avoiding gatherings of ten or more people.

The councils have decided, out of love for one another and for our community, to suspend all worship services, classes, and events until April 5th. Since that decision, our governor has banned gatherings of 10 or more, so this suspension is essentially now until further notice.

It's a decision that many, including sister congregations in the WELS throughout our area and nation, have also had to make. We have made this decision not out of fear but because we feel this is the considerate and loving course of action.

Here are some principles that helped guide this difficult decision:

- The Fourth Commandment and other words of Scripture reminds us to respect and obey the governing authorities as God's representatives. **We can recognize that by limiting the size of worship gatherings, the government is not attempting to deny our freedom of religion.** Rather, governing authorities have issued directives that they believe will protect us and our fellow citizens from harm. The government is not singling out churches for closure, but is addressing its recommendation to everyone and to all sorts of organizations. This is similar to situations when a blizzard or ice storm prompts authorities to announce that people should not be on the roads, and churches in response cancel services for a Sunday. A difference is that our nation will be experiencing a viral "blizzard."
- The Fifth Commandment and other words of Scripture tell us we have the responsibility not to do anything to hurt or harm our neighbor (or ourselves for that matter), but even to help our neighbor in times of need. The public health and safety concerns that prompted this government request are legitimate. More detailed information about the coronavirus and its dangers can be found in a statement put out by from Christian Life Resources (a church-related agency of the Wisconsin Synod). <http://christianliferesources.com/2020/03/16/christian-life-resources-advisement-on-thecovid-19-coronavirus>. **We should certainly trust in God to take care of us, but we should not tempt God by being unnecessarily careless concerning our health or the health of others.** St. Paul encourages us: "...in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3b-4).
- At the same time, all of Holy Scripture shows us the blessings of worship and encourages us to make faithful use of God's means of grace. I have quite a bit of experience in livestreaming worship, but with the slow internet speeds at our location and the time/equipment/cost to set it all up, it seems best to devote my time and our resources for a personal ministry to you.

Online Public Worship:

Morrison Zion Lutheran's Youtube channel (livestreaming Sundays 9am Wednesdays 10am) Link: www.tinyurl.com/mzluthworship

St. John Maribel: Youtube channel Click www.tinyurl.com/maribelworship

Messiah in Bellevue: <http://messiahgb.org/>

Radio:

St. Paul's Lutheran in Appleton: 1280AM Sundays @ 8:00am.

There is some talk in our circuit to work together to produce and mass produce services both for online streaming and DVD's. This is still a work in progress. Please call me if you'd like a DVD or sermon mailed to you.

Private Communion

If you desire to receive private Communion, I am ready and willing to serve. I plan to be in the office for these types of visits and I will visit you in your homes. We should not be scared of the sacrament, and in particular we should not be scared of the body and blood of Christ or of the forgiveness and comfort our Savior offers to us through these sacramental gifts. But in these times, we can and should be cautious and careful regarding those things of this material world that surround the sacrament, and that surround us as we receive it. With the Lord's help we will be appropriately cautious and careful. Contact me to set up a time.

In Closing

Though this is an odd and rapidly changing time for us and our nation, I believe that through this God is giving us an opportunity to share the love of Christ with one another and our community. Try to think of ways in which you might be able to help your neighbor. Consider calling your church friends from time to time. And let us all pray for our country and for our world, as the human race deals with this unprecedented pandemic.

To that end:

Can We Serve You?

If you are older or have a compromised immune system (or if you know someone in this situation), both of which make this virus especially dangerous, we are here to serve by running errands and helping you in any way we can. Please let us know.

Can You Serve?

If you are able to help those mentioned above who are limited in going out in public in this time please let us know. If you are willing to make periodic check-in calls with some of our older members, please let us know. We will also be given opportunities as a church to serve in our community in this time. If you are interested in serving in any of these ways, please email or call Pastor.

The recent events and reports do give us plenty of opportunities to be sensitive to the needs of others, flexible about our plans, and yet still reliant and faithful to the one who has overcome this world and conquered our greatest enemies in our place.



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Pastor's Sermon on March 15th: **The Reason for the Coronavirus: That God's Work Might Be Revealed**

John 9:1-3 (EHV) *"As Jesus was passing by, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that God's works might be revealed in connection with him."*

The Holy Spirit wants us to know the disciples had the wrong focus. They wanted to know why this man was born blind. What was the reason? Where could they point their finger? Jesus shows amazing restraint. He's responding to disciples who were more concerned with where to point the finger than how to help the man. Jesus could have sternly reminded them just how sinful the world is. He could have wagged his finger at their sin and how it's like a 4x4 beam coming out of their eyes! Instead Jesus says, *"that God's works might be revealed."*

God's work was revealed in how the blind man came to faith in Jesus as His Savior.

In the blind man's case, God's works were revealed when Jesus saves him from all sin and its effects including blindness. The fact that the world is sinful and that it causes terrible things like being blind from birth should be self-evident to the disciples. Jesus's amazing focus is on what a merciful God is going to do about it! He's going to send a savior! That's why he's here! Jesus wanted them focused on him, the great work of God that is revealed.

The Holy Spirit also wants us to know, that in all circumstances where we see the effects of sin, such as the wu-flu or corona virus, that this happened so that the God's Work might be revealed in us and for others. This is so important for us today. Calamities like the Wu-flu or coronavirus are going to come. Yes, there's evil and sin in the world.

"Deliver us from evil" is never prayed in a vacuum.

It presupposes that we're surrounded by evil, evil like natural disasters and disease that can take out huge swaths of the human population. We do know from the Bible, and as we studied in Revelation, that we should not be surprised when this happens. It has happened in the past and will happen in the future. But Jesus has us focused not on the sin and its evil, but on God's merciful response to it. The work of God that might be revealed in this situation: are revealed to you and through you.

What are the works of God that are to be revealed? Consider this: How we treat our neighbor.

We have a duty to our neighbor. After all, isn't that why we are here? That we might show the light that we have to others? Love your neighbor. Remember Jesus's two greatest commandments, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' (Matthew 22:37-39)

Our natural inclination when we are dealing with a crisis such as this, is to think of ourselves. This is not entirely sinful. As Paul writes in Ephesians 5:29. *"After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it."*

It certainly is not sinful to think of ourselves in the times of crisis, to take steps to care for ourselves and those under our charge (children, employees, etc.).

However, you and I should know that our sinful nature is gonna take this to the NTH degree. With our sinful nature, our God could easily become us. "We must take action, because it's only us after all! We must take care of ourselves at all costs! We must make sure we aren't shorthanded! Buy all the Toilet paper! Hoard all sanitizer!" Our focus could easily be all on ourselves, and forget about others. Our sinful nature would have us focus on making sure we have what we need at the expense of what our neighbor needs.

Then, there's the devil. who wants us to be afraid, worried, and nervous. He wants us looking inward. And with all this fear and anxiety, he would have us forget and lose Christ. The devil would have us forget and lose the great work of Christ loving us, dying for us, making us children of God, children he promises to take care of, not just spiritually, but physically as well.

Knowing that we have a sinful nature and a devil, how will you respond to the wu-flu?

One response is NOT to let the devil or our sinful nature win. Just because they hate it when we help someone else, we might just say, "Just to spite you, I'm going to think of someone else!" You want me to fear that I'll run out, just for that I'm going to provide for my neighbor!" Another response: It is pleasing to God to love my neighbor. Jesus says if I take care of even the least of these, I have his appreciation as if I did it to him. In doing something pleasing to God, I also know he will bless me for it. There are promises attached to loving my neighbor too, such as Psalm 41: 1-3 *"Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the LORD delivers him in times of trouble. The LORD will protect him and preserve his life; he will bless him in the land and not surrender him to the desire of his foes. ³ The LORD will sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness."*

If I care for someone else, I know that God isn't going to leave me behind. If I do what he has called me to do, He will take care of me, because I am part of His great work of showing others Christ.

Consider in terms of a burning building. If a building is burning, we don't rush in without any protection on our part. We take precautions. To do otherwise would be to put God to the test, like driving in a NASCAR race without a seat belt. On the other hand, we don't just let the building burn reasoning that if God wanted to save anyone in there, he would put the fire out. **You are the means he puts out the fire!**

We take all the necessary precautions and then we would enter into the flames, because we are God's hands in this world. What does it look like? Think of the health care industry. Consider but your job, which provides for you and your family, is also God revealing His work in you. So don't be afraid to go to work. Yes, take the necessary precautions. You know what they are. Consider the great work that God would have you do by loving and caring for the sick, knowing that God will watch over you too in this needed calling in our community.

As a pastor, I'm asking if you are sick or your immune system is compromised, don't be afraid to care for your neighbor by staying home. And please call me. Let me know. I know you care for me and don't want to bother me or expose me to what you might have, but know also that the devil would like nothing more than to drive a wedge between you and the spiritual care a pastor provides. I am willing to visit. I'm not afraid. I'll take necessary precautions, but I have been called to serve you with God's gifts, and you can bet God will be with me as I do so.

Children, you're going to be home for a few weeks. Consider your neighbor, in this care your parents and your teacher. This is going to be an adjustment for them. There's plenty of temptation here to be lazy or to not do what you are asked. Let the great work of God work through you as you work hard even at home. Be understanding with both your parents and school schedules. A great work of God can be displayed in you as you remember these people are those God has placed over you to prepare you for life.

It's really easy in a situation like this, to start pointing fingers at the folly of some, and making jokes at their expense.

Not everyone who is responding to this crisis is a Christian, nor will they have your confidence and hope. To look down on someone for their crazy response, to mock them in their fear, the Bible has a term for that: hate, and hatred is murder. 1 John 3: 15- *Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers*

Even among Christians, even WELS Christians, the response will be different.

Not every WELS Christian will handle this the same way. For in this circumstance the strength and weakness of faith will be revealed. We all won't respond the same way, and that isn't necessarily sinful if someone responds differently than you do. Someone strong in faith may say, "Whatever will be will be. The Lord has given me a calling and I'm going to carry out the great work of loving my neighbor. If I get sick, so be it. Heaven is mine. God will provide for my family and we'll see each other again." A weak in faith Christian may not respond the same way. Let us not mock, ridicule or judge when another Christian responds differently to this crisis than we would. Even if you consider them weaker than you, they are still part of the body of Christ, and we need them just as much as they need us. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:20 *"As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!'"* *And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'"*²² *On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,*²³ *and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor."*

I began this sermon talking about focus.

It is a temptation for us in this crisis to focus on the wrong things.

Maybe we focus on the sins of others, focus on how crazy people can be, focus on how bad this world is getting. Let's realize that the house is burning. Our community is burning. Is not a real fire, of course, but it calls for to action, so that God's great work can be revealed.

What are you going to do?

First: Look at yourselves and ask: Am I behaving out of fear or anxiety?

If so let me turn to Christ and let His great work in my heart overcome my fear and move me to love my neighbor. Let me also take precautions so that I am not testing the LORD or putting my neighbor into danger. I'll heed the advice the government has, a government which God has placed over me.

Second: Look at your neighbor.

Find ways that you can love and care for him or her, instead of the cruel jokes and judging him or her. Even that neighbor who's hoarding all the toilet paper.

This is a turning point, time for us to focus on God's work in us as we are lights in the world God has called us to this moment.

Let us live up to the people he has called us to be. A loving Christian family of God who cares. God is faithful, God will work great things in us and through us because of Jesus Christ.