

This isn't the sermon I planned to deliver this week, but in light of the rapidly developing COVID-19 crisis, it's the sermon I that I felt needed to be preached. We all have a part to play in slowing the spread of the virus, and each of you listening to this has an important role to play by immediately adopting best practices, including physically distancing ourselves from other as best we possibly can. As medical historian and epidemic expert Howard Markel recently put it,

“Coronavirus is a socially transmitted disease, and we all have a social contract to stop it. What binds us is a microbe – but it also has the power to separate us. We're a very small community, whether we acknowledge it or not, and this proves it. The time to act like a community is now.”

Like many of you, I was at turns shocked and impressed when I read Bishop +Rob's Pastoral Directive, which I shared with all of you who have email access on Friday. What shocked me is just how serious a response he felt was necessary – though I have to confess it is similar to the response I imagined that message would contain. What impressed me was the spiritual insight the letter expressed. The tone was “spot on,” and in case any of you sort of skipped past that part of his directive, I want to share it with you verbally so you really hear it:

The power of Christianity is found in its astonishing capacity to turn the worse news into Good News. This is the message of the Cross after all: a means of humiliation, degradation and death becomes the means of Life. Now, even as we contemplate and prepare for a time of physical distance, I am now convinced that it is for such a time as this that all of our talk in the past years about how we can actually be the Body of Christ in the world can happen in even more liberating and healthful ways. Now is an urgent time when we, instead of looking out only for ourselves alone, can reach out in love, albeit by phone or digitally, or in small and hygienic groups with news of faith, hope and love and with spiritual companionship.

I sincerely and faithfully urge us all to see this peculiar time not as a catastrophe that instills fear, suspicion or shame among us, but as a spiritual fast and a civic duty, the reclaiming of a venerable and powerful spiritual tradition through which,

like Jesus in the wilderness, we are called to renew our trust and our awareness of how God is blessing us, yes, blessing us, in this season of abstinence from physical touch and even, for a time, from corporate public worship. I believe that the church's ongoing work to be reinvented, strengthened and renewed will be accelerated and deepened during this time. Heartily, I pray that we can share an Easter Communion like none other we have experienced in our lifetimes, when we can come together after the wave of infection passes.

The fact is, COVID-19 is testing our understanding and commitment to our interdependence as the body of Christ. In I Cor. 12 the Apostle Paul casts a vision of the church as functioning as a human body, and "when one part suffers, all parts suffer with it." I believe it is important for us to not have a false sense of security and even a selfish complacency should we be fortunate enough not to face the health challenges of those who are most vulnerable to this infection. I'm sure you share with me the desire to make sure we don't inadvertently spread the virus to those who can least afford to contract it. Indeed, it is both a moral and pragmatic imperative to take this outbreak seriously and play our part to protect ourselves and others, particularly those most in harm's way.

Churches and clergy (as the Bishop has effectively pointed out) have an indispensable role to play in any crisis, including a public health crisis like this one. It's undeniably the case that, painful as it might be economically, socially, and even spiritually, we will need to reconsider what worship and other forms of ministry that take place in our contexts should look like for a while. If physical distancing is indeed the most effective strategy we can undertake as a society to mitigate the impact of this epidemic, one of the church's most important functions right now may be to take as many of its activities online and over the phone as possible.

One Rabbi put it this way:

"Every hand that we don't shake must become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise." (*Rabbi Josef Kanefsky*)

Already, the Bishop has urged us to suspend worship services until Palm Sunday. Other related activities, such as our Lenten programs, our planned Vitality Sunday

conversation on March 29 at Trinity Church, and such events as next Sunday's planned piano concert at Christ Church, are also being canceled or postponed.

Some of you may wonder if this is "too much" of a response. (Maybe others think it's not enough.) All I ask you to consider is this: The long incubation period for this virus means it's often too late to wait until people in the congregation are confirmed to have COVID-19 because people may feel perfectly well and still be passing the virus to the people they come into contact with. In addition, as trusted institutions in the community, modeling the behavior and level of caution that's necessary to mitigate the impact of the epidemic helps individuals to take it seriously and do the same, and helps leaders of other community institutions to follow churches' lead.

The mantra you may have been hearing and reading in recent days, "Preparation, not panic" is indeed the correct approach, no matter how bad things get. In 2 Tim. 1:7, Paul tells us, "For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." This is a time for us to use our power, love, and sound minds to act rationally but decisively to help keep those most vulnerable to COVID-19 safe and cared for by slowing its spread, thus buying time for our health care providers to meet the surge of need that is almost certainly coming. Dr. Tedros, Secretary General of the World Health Organization, echoed this call Friday, saying,

"Today's declaration of a pandemic is a call to action – for everyone, everywhere. It's also a call for responsibility and solidarity – as nations united and as people united. As we fight the virus, we cannot let fear go viral ... Let's overcome this common threat together."