

A pastoral message from Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton

Dear Church,

We live in anxious times. COVID-19 makes these times even more anxious. In a time of crisis, it is our natural instinct to gather together, but this pandemic demands that we distance ourselves from one another for a time. This has led to major disruptions to all aspects of our lives including corporate worship. There is discussion and experimentation with the celebration and distribution of Holy Communion.

This disruption may actually be of benefit to us. The world has hit the pause button and now we have time to reflect more deeply on the evangelical understanding of the Word that was recovered during the Reformation. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate. The proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. The question should be turned around from, "How do we receive Holy Communion?" to "How does the Word of God come to us and how do we receive the Word of God?" God comes to us in all these ways and is really present. Holy Communion is not the only way that the Word of God is communicated, not even the preeminent way that the Word of God is communicated.

This disruption also gives us the time and space to examine our understanding of and practices around Holy Communion. I grew up when communion was celebrated once a month. Now we have done such a good job of encouraging our people to receive the sacrament more frequently that many, if not most, of our congregations have weekly communion! Of course, the pandemic-forced physical distancing has interrupted this practice. But it hasn't separated us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:39) We don't know how long this pandemic will last, but it won't last forever. Fasting from Holy Communion for a time might be a good discipline. This absence makes God's presence more profound. During this limited fast we might become more aware of God's presence around us and in creation in ways we never noticed before.

We recommend that we do not urge people to employ virtual communion, that deacons, pastors, and bishops use this time as a teaching moment about the Lutheran understanding of the Word of God, that we make use of the Service of the Word and Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Night Prayer and Responsive Prayer, that we spend time in scripture study, that we pray for each other, and that we contact others regularly by phone, email, or social media.

We also recommend that we be gentle with one another. We've never been here before. We are all trying to do our best to be faithful and loving in this time of COVID-19.