

Generosity in Motion ~ June 1, 2020

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." ~ John 13: 34-35.

The above scripture focuses on the command Jesus makes to his disciples to love one another. From here arises our mission to be known as Jesus' disciples because of our love for one another. Our call to love our neighbor and protect the most vulnerable among us is crucial as we face this time of remarkable disruption and uncertainty with the COVID-19 related death-toll passing the 100,000 mark in the U.S.; church leaders figuring out how to safely return to in-person worship; the unrest following the murder of George Floyd; and the continuing effects of racism and police brutality. This situation compels us to reimagine our relationships and the ways we show up in the world as church to do God's work. Our call to love our neighbor and protect the most vulnerable among us is rooted in our identity as beloved children of God, made in God's image and who make up the Body of Christ, the church. I am in awe with the presence, courage, compassion and care of our bishops, pastors, deacons and church leaders in the midst of the tense world around us. I am in awe that the church has never closed though people are unable to gather physically and that the church has never stopped worshipping God, proclaiming the Good News, making disciples, living the Gospel, loving neighbors, and doing justice in Jesus name. Our call to love our neighbor and protect the most vulnerable among us is grounded in and requires love, compassion, and collective work to eradicate hunger, racism and injustice in our communities, in the church, and in the world.

In the last months, the church has witnessed the power of the resurrected Christ by feeding and providing for guests and neighbors; by caring for and comforting the lonely, the marginalized, and the oppressed; by speaking truth to power and seeking justice; by praying with others and sharing a word of encouragement; by proclaiming the good news to the world. All these words, deeds and actions come from God who loved us first. God's love is lived out in so many ways and leads us into the world around us.

How do we respond to God's call to serve and love our neighbors? We faithfully steward the gifts God has so abundantly given to us. As members of the ELCA, we do mission together through our financial giving, which we call mission support. Mission support is the portion of our weekly financial offering that our congregation shares with our synod and the churchwide organization, the other two expressions of this church. We do God's work in ways that no individual, congregation, or synod can do alone.

Our mission support helps fund churchwide ministries like the ELCA Lutheran Disaster Response, which recently awarded our Synod with a grant to support congregations with robust feeding ministries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our synod has shared this gift with 30 congregations in appreciation of the vital and needed feeding ministries that these congregations are providing in their community amid this intersection of crises: a public health crisis, an economic crisis and a social/civic crisis.

Here are some glimpses of this work which have been featured in local news reports:



Figure 1: Spike Enzweiler, manager of St. Matthew Trinity's Lunchtime Ministry, with Pastor Gary LeCroy.

St. Matthew Trinity Lutheran Church's Lunchtime Ministry in Hoboken has appeared on NJ.com. The ministry has changed and adapted in the last months, continuing to serve and feed guests. Stanley Enzweiler, known as Spike, is the program manager and in his words, "While our sit-down services have been put on hold, and our guests miss the opportunity to sit down and enjoy each other's company we are continuing to provide everyone who comes in with food, coffee, toiletries, and most importantly, a warm welcome." You can read more about their work:

<https://www.nj.com/opinion/2020/04/missing-community-the-lutheran-lunch-program-still-serves-soul-food-faith-matters.html?fbclid=IwAR0iqVsecWVUr72WHTn7Eqm6iobZmiM2-GyLDIOJyDn9mqd-oqb5eJ8L59c>

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jersey City operates the Sharing Place Food Pantry, where "People come from all over the county," Pastor Jessica Lambert says. "We are receiving phone calls all day, every day from people who are in a food emergency. I would say all of the new people we had last month were newly unemployed Uber drivers and wait staff at restaurants. Most of the people we serve are people who are working; they just cannot make ends meet."

Also in Jersey City, St. John's Food Pantry Director Rose Davis said "We get calls for food every day. This month, we had a 'grab and take' with social distancing. We put pastas in the bag, canned soups in the bags, tuna, water and toilet paper. We had 180 families come by." You can read more about the ministries of both congregations: https://jcitytimes.com/jersey-city-nonprofits-soldier-on/?fbclid=IwAR2VdrCxzuipoPxVMkzvy5vGHgNOQymxbCewT5OCIYs4_30WUE5VFF19JhA



Figure 2: These are the bags ready to be distributed to 168 families at St. John's Food Pantry.

God's love in Christ is lived out whenever you share food with your neighbor. Watch this video from Prince of Peace Lutheran Church Food Pantry in Marlton: <https://www.fox29.com/news/nj-food-pantry-sees-spike-in-demand-amid-coronavirus-pandemic>

Though food insecurity has increased, we have also seen a rise in food donations, volunteer work, and other resource offerings. I am so grateful for the ways you are bringing hope, healing, and love to your community for the sake of the world that God loves so much. I hope that we continue to be generous in the face of precarity and injustice.

Your sibling in Christ,
Rev. Maristela Freiberg
Director for Evangelical Mission and Assistant to the Bishop