



A PASTORAL LETTER TO CHRIST CHURCH ANGLICAN

March 13, 2020

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-49).

We hear these words every Sunday as we gather for worship. These familiar words of our Lord will now guide us in these challenging times as COVID19 courses through our country.

I spent most of yesterday receiving guidance from our Archbishop and our Bishop, as well as in prayer. Last night, the Parish Council, in accordance with our by-laws, gave me guidance on an important matter pertaining to public worship. *Based on the unanimous advice of the Parish Council, I am canceling all public gatherings of the parish through Palm Sunday.* This includes all worship, choir and music rehearsals, committee meetings, and any other gatherings of our parishioners that may be in violation of the principle of “social distancing.” I would ask that all Bible studies, prayer groups and small groups do the same.

This is sobering news but let me encourage you to see the hand of God in this, even in all of its threatening aspects.

As it has become clear that we will not be able to contain the COVID19 virus in the U.S., it is incumbent upon us that we mitigate its effects by staying away from gatherings where we might expose ourselves to the virus, or if we are unknowing carriers, to expose others. While this action may seem dramatic, it is clear to us that such a decision is the best expression of *loving our neighbor*. This decision is an act of pastoral protection as well as an extension of grace and care to those most vulnerable to the virus. It is also a witness to our friends and neighbors that we wish to be a parish “for the neighborhood” as we seek the welfare of the city (Jeremiah 29:7).

I have postponed my Lenten Retreat (which would have started this Sunday afternoon) to help shepherd this transition. Parish staff will be working from home and arrangements are underway to make sure you can communicate with us easily by phone, e-mail or text. Fr. Joe and I are already working on regular communication with you that will gather us around the Scriptures, call us to prayer and offer mutual encouragement and hope. Mark Williams has postponed the offering of The Messiah until the fall and the leadership of the Tour of Homes, with full consent of the Vestry, has moved the Tour to the fall as well. So far, these decisions and the enormous logistics around them have gone smoothly and with solid support from the community. We are already seeing the work of the Holy Spirit.

Plans are to gather in some fashion for Easter worship, but no decision has been made about Holy Week services. We will take matters day by day and assess them prayerfully. What is the right decision today may

need to be modified tomorrow. You will be informed as soon as possible on all decisions once they have been made.

The Parish Council discussed how to look for mission opportunities in this situation. Many of our parishioners fall in the “at risk” category and will be somewhat isolated in the coming weeks. Think of ways you can communicate with them, encourage them and share the love of Christ with them. The same goes for our friends and neighbors in the city. Share ideas with one another on how we might encourage those in nursing homes that they are not forgotten, but loved. (We think it best to communicate by phone, text or e-mail. Letters through the Postal Service are handled by a number of postal workers before they are delivered.)

Check your e-mail regularly and often. Look for texts and voicemails. We would rather “annoy” you with too much information than keep you guessing about what is going on. You are a part of our family and, especially at this time, we want to be together though we may not be in proximity to one another.

For those who may not have received the Bishop’s letter to the Diocese, you may find it here:
<http://gulfatlanticdiocese.org/?s=COVID19>

While I fall in the “at risk” age, I am in good health with no medical issues. Nevertheless, I will be exercising the discipline of “social distancing” to the best of my ability as I go about my daily tasks these next few weeks.

Most of all: be in prayer. One of the values focused upon during our Vestry and Parish Council Planning Meeting last month was “prayer and fasting.” Little did we know how important that priority would become. I invite you to pray this closing collect from The Supplication (ACNA Book of Common Prayer, page 98) every day while we are apart from one another:

“Look mercifully, O Father, on our infirmities; and, for the glory of your Name, rescue us from all those evils we now endure; and grant that in all our troubles we may put our whole trust and confidence in your mercy, serving you in holiness and purity of life, to your honor and glory; through our only Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

In God’s peace,

Fr. Marc