

March 11, 2020

Dear friends in Christ,

“And who is my neighbor,” the lawyer asked Jesus. Jesus answers by telling one of the most powerful, memorable stories of sacred scripture – The Good Samaritan. After he finishes the story, Jesus looks back at the lawyer and asks him, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

I call the Parable of the Good Samaritan a story of the Beloved Community. The Beloved Community is as broad and deep as God’s all-encompassing reach, it is God’s love extended to all of life. As people who follow Jesus, whose constant message was that the Beloved Community (the Kingdom of Heaven) is near, and among us, we are called to be active in helping manifest God’s love, God’s Beloved Community. Living as neighbor to all — across lines of, perhaps, striking difference — is the challenge, and the promise, of life in the Beloved Community.

I am asking you now to stretch further, or better, to ask God to help us see and live beyond our normal bounds. Let us actively consider how we would answer Jesus in our own lives, our own congregations; how would we say we are being neighbor, not only to those with whom we share a common faith life, but to those who live in our neighborhoods? The Diocese of California has been asking that question in the Bay Area, and living into the answers, for 171 years. We must ask and answer this question anew, with God’s help.

Holding that question in our hearts as the new coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to spread in our region, **I prayerfully ask all churches in the Diocese of California to cancel ALL public worship services for the month of March, with the possible exception of weddings and funerals.** This decision will be revisited by March 31, at which time I will communicate our next steps.

In the meantime, **I ask all congregations to consider how they might livestream worship services** with a small gathering of clergy, altar party, and possibly choir members, making sure none in the gathering is among those most vulnerable to coronavirus. **We will be sharing resources in the next few days to assist with this.**

As we all know, trying times are highly stressful, not only for our congregations but also our neighborhoods. Regardless of their beliefs, people are going to come to us, looking for pastoral and spiritual care. Some additional questions to ponder:

How might we respond to this opportunity, within the guidelines of our city and diocesan recommendations?

- Perhaps the church doors are open for a blessing or conversation?

- Maybe those of us with labyrinths could be more intentional with invitations to our neighbors? Share your creative ideas with us, so they may be included in our upcoming communications with the diocese (look for the next update email from the diocese, which will contain a number of downloadable worship resources, no later than this Friday).

This decision may be difficult for some. Let us listen and support one another; let us be reassured that, by asking for communion, we can be assured that our loving and gracious God will meet our need, even though we may be prevented from receiving the bread and wine by circumstances.

In practical terms, I will continue to provide advice to our diocesan community, giving updates as needed in a timely manner. As we continue to move forward facing the shifting reality of COVID-19 in the Diocese of California, I commend you for responding with so much love and creativity to what is already quite challenging. We may very well have much more to face with respect to COVID-19, and I do not take this pandemic at all lightly. At the same time, I know that not only will God help us, but we will be transformed by our love and courage in responding.

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