

Greetings to my Neighbors in Christ Family,

There are two items I would like to bring to your attention this beautiful month where we celebrate Holy Week and the Resurrection of our Lord: How to navigate worship on-line and a message written by our SWMN Synod Bishop Jon Anderson. The first is that I have been recording videos and adding them to Facebook under my specific page. If you have internet access and would like to view my messages and Sunday worships, please friend me at "Erik Karlson" and I will automatically confirm your request. This allows you to view what I have been uploading on the internet every few days, as well as keeping track of what is going on in the life of our Neighbors in Christ Parish. Or, you can email me at pastorerikkarlson@gmail.com, and I can certainly send you the links to view what I have created. I just ask that if you do so, please understand that the videos and links are not picture perfect...sometimes they are a bit grainy, if you will. But the messages are still there.

And I want to also introduce a message to congregations from Jon Anderson, our synodical bishop. His message is honest and forthright, and his prayer is for safety for all. Here he writes:

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
-Psalm 46*

I give thanks to God for all of you. The last week seems like a blurrrrrrr. Each day bringing new twists and turns to the life of our synod, institutions, congregations, rostered ministers and baptized ones' lives. It makes me tired to just remember it all. I am still in shock because I know that I am not feeling too much yet. I am starting to become more aware of my fear, anxiety, anger and frustrations. We have lost much and we will lose more as we seek to protect people and stop the virus. I am struggling to imagine how this will work out. I am concerned about people I love. I have to admit at times I have a hard time trusting God in this time of the coronavirus. There I said it. Doubts are part of the life of faith.

When I was in college I found the work of a German Poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, helpful and powerful. In an ironic title, **Letters to a Young Poet**, which was actually written to a man older than he was, Rilke shares his wisdom about being a poet. It struck me as I walked tonight in the dark. He was talking about life in all of its depth and challenges, but it is not a bad quote for people living into the uncertainty of this time of the coronavirus.

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

We will live our way through this time of questions. I believe God will pull us like a magnet through the hard and uncertain days ahead. God will surprise us with gifts of grace, beauty and meaning as we work

through the days, weeks and probably months ahead. When we get lost, God will send God's Spirit to twist us back towards God's preferred and promised future. This is not God's will but one more way God's creation which includes each of us rebels against God's will and purpose.

In our baptism, the old self was put to death. Day after day we return to our baptism and our Gracious God raises us to new life so we can love God and love our neighbors. In the days ahead we will not just be working with the new technology and the protocols of physical distancing to protect our vulnerable neighbors, family and even our self. In the days ahead we will need to do some work together on where God is in all this. Because we are people who believe in the "Theology of the Cross," we do not believe we are God-forsaken in this time, quite the opposite. We believe that our God goes even into cross places to be with us and bring God's resurrecting love to bear on us and this broken world. We know following Jesus is not about glory but often involves suffering for the sake of others like Jesus did for us.

I am thankful for your ministry and hard work in this new environment that is strange and where we are struggling to get the information that can help us make good decisions. Thanks for proclaiming the Gospel in what you do and what you say. Thanks for loving people who are struggling. You are witnesses to the one who calls us to follow and commands us "Be not afraid" and who promises, "I am with you always." Don't hear my words to be only talking to ministers, pastors and church workers. I am thankful for how all of the baptized have been seeking to follow Christ as they live out their many callings.

Our team has been focusing on supporting your pastors and ministers in this opening week of this crisis. In the next week we will add to our focus crucial lay leaders. We will be sending out a letter to your presidents. We plan to begin doing webinars to listen, encourage and support people who God has called to serve as council leaders at this time.

You know the virus is being found in more and more places. Our early plans now are gone, as we begin to do church and life in an environment where few are ready. We are leveraging technology to continue to transform ministry in a time when we are not able to have more than ten people in a room together. Funerals, weddings, baptisms, gathering for communion all are suddenly going to be different. We need to get together and lament all the losses. We also need to notice the presence and work of our mysterious God who is active in our midst.

We are full of questions. We are trying to not waste the crisis by seeking to serve the Gospel. We trust God will grow our spiritual lives deeper in faith, hope and love in the midst of this experiences. We know there will be surprises, twists and turns yet to come.

We are united in a prayer, "Dear God redeem this, too." Dear God, somehow recreate out of the uncertainty, fear and losses a healthier world, a healthier church, deeper faith, greater love and a profound trust in You. Empowers us as things change in the days ahead in us, in our congregations, our communities and our world.

We will keep on lifting up information.
www.elca.org/publichealth
www.swmnelca.org/category/covid19-resources

Thanks for all the ways you are pulling your congregation together. Thanks for supporting your council and pastors. Thanks for the ways you are collaborating with sister congregations of our tradition and

siblings of other Christian traditions. Thanks for the ways you are protecting the weak, lonely and the least powerful in our midst. Thanks for the way you are keeping the main thing the main thing in the midst of this time of crisis.

I remember reading about how Winston Churchill declared after the British had won the battles of North Africa, "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning." This moment is not nearly as dangerous as that time, but we have learned this past week we can live deeper in Christ without what we now realize is the precious gift of communal gathering. We have learned that if we can find ways to do faith formation work together even as we miss one another. We can encourage one another to practice the faith and love our neighbors on our own while our longing to share a normal life together intensifies.

We fear we will lose some of our dear ones, and suddenly every call or conversation is priceless. We know in Christ, nothing can separate them or us from God. While we are nervous and unsure of what will work or not work, we are pivoting into this time of uncertainty to try new things and seek to become the church we need to be in the coming century. We hear God's Spirit calling to us and challenging us to not waste this crisis, but rather to trust in the one who God raised after facing the cross. Our gracious resurrecting Lord will guide, lead and protect us as we travel through the coming days.

I like to joke that this work has helped my prayer life in many ways. The coming days will call us all deeper into prayer. The coming days will call for many different prayers, but today we pray this prayer.

God, our peace and our strength, we pray for our nation and the world as we face new uncertainties around coronavirus. Protect the most vulnerable among us, especially all who are currently sick or in isolation. Grant wisdom, patience, and clarity to health care workers, especially as their work caring for others puts them at great risk. Guide us as we consider how best to prepare and respond in our families, congregations, workplaces, and communities. Give us courage to face these days not with fear but with compassion, concern, and acts of service, trusting that you abide with us always; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Thanks for all you are doing to serve the Gospel and love your neighbors.
May God protect and guide us all.

+ Bishop Jon V. Anderson

Blessings, peace, and safe health be with you all in this special time. We do not know how long this is going to last but know that God is on your side and has not left you or forsaken you...I truly believe that. My prayer is that we may see one another again and that Christ's resurrection and the empty tomb fill your hearts with love, promise, forgiveness, and eternal life in the days and weeks ahead.

God's peace be with you all.

Rev. Erik Karlson

Pastor, Neighbors in Christ Parish