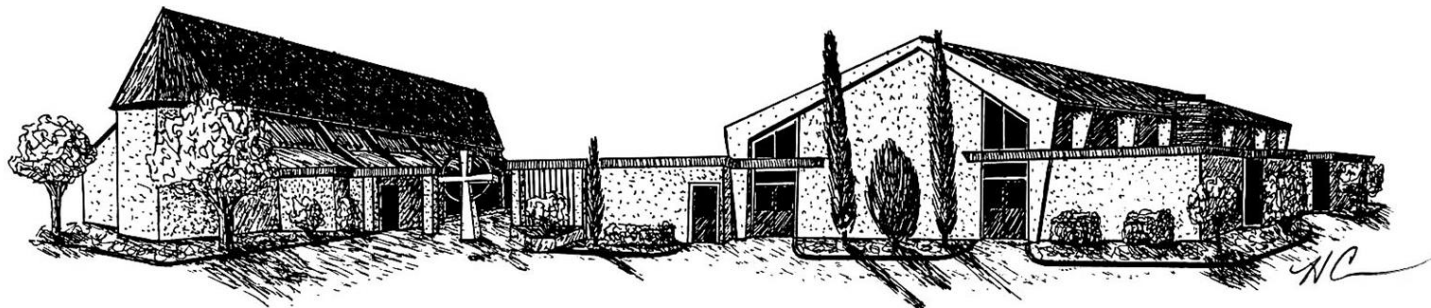


Lutheran Church of Our Savior



March 28, 2020 AD

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

At the writing of this letter, we've been under the 'Shelter-in-Place' order for some 11 days, and have been under social restriction for some 15 days. My prayer for each of you—the members of Lutheran Church of Our Savior—is that you're in good health, both bodily and spiritually. Such an occurrence as this may be unprecedented in your experience; it is in mine. However, what we face isn't unprecedented in the history of the Church. Individually and corporately God's people, for one reason or another, have had to 'shelter-in-place' at various times. Almost exactly 100 years ago, due the epidemic of Spanish Flu, Christian congregations regionally closed temporarily. We—at least locally—find ourselves in a similar scenario today.

We're saddened, of course, because the temporary 'Shelter-in-Place' order has rendered us unable to gather to worship together—together, as a Christian family, to give ear to the Shepherd's voice, to sing the beloved liturgy and our hymns, to pray as one people, and, of course, to receive our Savior's body and blood in the blessed Lord's Supper. It's the last of these that I want to address, answering questions that have been asked and informing you of our present approach to the matter.

*Firstly, we—the pastors—are glad that you hunger and thirst for the Sacrament of the Altar: Jesus' body and blood. Not having had opportunity to receive it for two weeks, it's natural that a Christian would crave it, or begin to (cf. *Small Catechism, Preface.21-23, "Christian Questions with Their Answers," 20.*) In this present exile from the Supper (as it's been described; see also *Psalm 137:1*), it's important for us to acknowledge, and to affirm heartily, that our God's grace toward us is "superabundantly rich" in that He's supplied us with various means by which we receive the gospel. In the *Smalcald Articles*, one of the writings of our Lutheran Confessions (i.e., the *Book of Concord*), Martin Luther remarked:*

We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich [and liberal] in His grace [and goodness]. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached [He commands to be preached] in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through Baptism. Thirdly,

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through the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, Matt. 18:20: Where two or three are gathered together, etc. (Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church: German-Latin-English. Public domain. Bracketed sections original.)

At this time, by its use in our homes, we affirm, and by its continued use during these days, we reaffirm the efficacy of and the edification we receive from God's Word. Jesus teaches us that His words are spirit and life (John 6:63); and while different from the Supper (i.e., His Word doesn't contain Jesus' body and blood) it is no less than the Supper in conveying God's grace through the gospel. Cheerfully and readily, then, let us use His Word, which—thank God—He has not presently taken from us! The use of it even shows our gratitude for it.

Questions. Below, we wish to address questions that either have been asked of us or that you may have.

- **For how long will I be without the Lord's Supper?** At this point it's impossible to say. The pastors recently were on a conference call with Pacific Justice Institute. The lawyers indicated that our certain inalienable rights (afforded by the US Constitution), like the freedom of assembly and freedom to practice our religion, could in time of emergency be temporarily suspended; however, the longer the emergency the weaker the basis for the authorities suspending these rights. If the 'Shelter-in-Place' order should be extended, then the pastors and Elders will revisit the present course.
- **Isn't this a matter of obeying God rather than men?** It's, of course, right for Christians to obey the governing authorities, as far as we're able (cf. Romans 13:1-7). If the authorities require of us something contrary to God's will, then we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). We don't view the "Shelter-in-Place" order by the governor as being in conflict with God's word and will, not so far. In fact, it accords with God's will, for its intention is to keep us from hurting or harming our neighbor in his body (5th commandment). Its aim is to save life, and our compliance is an act of Christian love.
- **Is it sinful for me not to receive the Lord's Supper at this time?** No. It would be wrong for a person (and a sign of an unhealthy disposition) if, when the Supper was available, he neglected and despised it. You're not receiving it because presently it's unavailable, not because you despise or are neglecting it.
- **Why do non-local congregations of family and friends have the Lord's Supper available to them, albeit in small groups?** Not all states or localities in the union are under a 'Shelter-in-Place' order. As of March 27, California and 24 other states are under such orders. Additionally, to my understanding, houses of worship have been exempt from this order in other places, like in the state of Ohio. (According to the California order, houses of worship are not exempt.) Therefore, some pastors and congregations in other places may yet still be able legally to gather in small groups to administer and receive the Supper.
- **What about celebrating the Lord's Supper in our homes? Or what about a 'virtual' (online) consecration of the elements by the pastor remotely?** The Lord's Supper is a communal meal ("Holy Communion"), and is under near all circumstances celebrated (consecrated) by the called and ordained servant of Christ—the pastor. This is the historic practice of the Church. Article 14 of our Augsburg Confession states that "no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called" (Triglot), and this applies in all but the most extreme circumstances. (When communion is brought to the homebound, it's the pastor who administers the Supper to them.) We don't believe that we've yet reached that point of 'most extreme circumstance;' for do recall that many will vacation for 2, 3, or 4 weeks and go without the Supper for that long. Our homebound members frequently have gone 3 or 4 weeks without receiving the Meal. Regarding a 'virtual' consecration of the elements, see the recently released advisory document by the The LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), "Communion and COVID-19," here...
<https://files.constantcontact.com/d365b283001/411c34f9-a931-478a-9bc4-a7d32146c31c.pdf>

What, then, can and should we now do? Make ready use of our Lord's Word. You can do this by way of the services and sermons being posted regularly online to the church website, lcos.org (return regularly to these as one would return regularly to church); while these recordings can't be replacements for our gathering, they can be a 'next best thing.' Utilize the near-daily audio devotions that are being posted. Read the Holy Scripture; being Lent we can recommend that one begins with the gospel according to John, chapters 12-21. There's no time like the present for fathers and husbands to assume or continue their roles as 'house pastors' (Martin Luther's phrase, as I recall), spending time with spouse and family in the Word and at prayer. If such daily study and discussion in our Lord's Word and will was instructed of believers of old (Deuteronomy 6:6-9), can we and should we not also take up God's Word for our good (cf. Ephesians 6:4, 17)? And, pray; pray that our Lord would deliver us and others from this present, and from every, ill.

If you should have additional questions for us, or concerns, please feel free to call at our homes or to e-mail any of the pastors (pastorjbestul@lcos.org; pastoradebner@lcos.org; bestul@comcast.net).

Noah and his family were sequestered for months on months—almost 1 year (cf. Genesis 7-8). But in time the dove returned with an olive branch, and then didn't return at all. Our Lord willing, the day is coming when we'll enjoy again God' gracious sign and testimony of His good will toward us, not in the form of a rainbow in the clouds, but in the form of His blessed Supper, Jesus' body and blood, "given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."

*In Christ,
Pastor John Bestul*

*Pastor D. Bestul
Pastor A. Debner*

The Saturday after the Annunciation of Our Lord, 2020