

Sunday March 8, 2020
The Rev. Christopher McLaren
St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Beloved of God,

We are all concerned about the growing health concerns caused by the coronavirus. So, I want to talk plainly about it for a little while this morning as it affects our faith community here. While there are no known cases of coronavirus in New Mexico to date, it seems likely that eventually there will be cases and we will need to act prudently and wisely to protect each other and those we love. There are many good resources coming out from our church particularly from Episcopal Relief and Development and from the Diocese of Olympia. We will be making their resources available on our website, newsletter, and publications.

But just so we are being clear I want to say a few things right now publicly about our approach to the growing crisis in our world and now in our nation.

Our role in responding, to the coronavirus disease as churches, dioceses and compassionate Christians, is to:

- **Combat fear with knowledge in order to encourage preparedness and decrease stigma.**
- **Maintain operational continuity and continue worship life in the case of potential quarantine and disruption.**
- **Show God's compassion and care to those in our communities who are affected.**

These are general guidelines, and I want to assure you that I will be working with my staff, a team of physicians from our parish, the diocesan office, health authorities and others to craft our ongoing response to this issue as it pertains to our local practices and concerns. It is important to understand that things are dynamic and we will be developing our response as things continue to change and develop around us.

COVID-19 SUMMARY:

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. The virus that causes COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus that was first identified during an investigation into an outbreak in Wuhan, China. In recent weeks, the virus has spread from China to other countries.

- Symptoms of the disease are fever, cough, shortness of breath. If you are experiencing these symptoms, call your doctor immediately. Symptoms may appear between two to 14 days after exposure to the disease. It is spreading rapidly with cases developing in many countries around the world.
- The disease is new so there is no vaccine at this time. Health professionals are still learning all of the ways that the disease is transmitted and who is most susceptible.
- There is little information about how the disease impacts pregnant women or the child in their womb.
- It is best to take precautions, especially if you have a weaker immune system, a history of respiratory issues or are over 70 years old. If identified early, the survival rate for this virus is high.

INDIVIDUAL PREVENTION: The disease is spread through respiratory drops.

- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you sneeze or cough.
- Wash your hands after coughing, sneezing, handling diapers, preparing food or using the bathroom.
- Stay home if you are feeling ill.

As far as it affects our daily and weekly worship here at St. Mark's, I want to say a few things. Some of them, I am going to say rather strongly and I am asking you to be thoughtful about what I am saying and to accept that they are the best practices available to help us prevent the spread of disease.

1. At this time, we will continue to distribute communion in both kinds bread and wine. There may come a time where the chalice is not in use for a season.
2. There will no longer be any communion by intinction, dipping the bread into the wine. As many of you already know this is the least sanitary method and poses the greatest risk to the community. I am

no longer just asking you to discontinue doing this practice, I am directing the entire congregation to cease communion by intinction. To be clear, dipping the bread into the wine is no longer permitted within our worship at St. Mark's during this time. If this decision angers you because of your piety, please know that I am sympathetic and willing to sit down and talk with you but that my decision is firm and final.

3. Regarding the Passing of the Peace, Bp. Hunn has asked that we begin to approach the peace differently for a necessary period of time. He is suggesting that we use elbow bumps, a hand to the shoulder, bowing or other methods that will reduce hand to hand contact. This I believe can be an area of creativity and could in fact become more meaningful over time. Perhaps making eye contact with a few in a meaningful way could be quite powerful. This is a time to offer the Peace of God which passes all understanding to those near to you.
4. We will try to do our best to have hand sanitizer available at the church. As some of you know, due to the crisis some products are becoming hard to come by.
5. We also want to remind the entire community, that each of you have agency. You can decide what you are willing to do and what you are not willing to do. Once again, if you are elderly or immuno-compromised, we ask you to take extra precautions. If you are feeling ill, we ask you to stay home and rest.
6. These measures are just a beginning and there may be additional actions that we are required to take or feel are necessary in the weeks to come. What is important is that we are all working together as the Body of Christ to protect and keep one another safe and well through this crisis in our world.
7. The blessing of community here at St. Mark's is a wonderful thing and I know that each of us want to do everything in our power to protect and nurture it. This includes trying to be kind and loving toward one another throughout this time.
8. This is new to all of us and we will be doing the best we can as things develop. If you have concerns or input for the team that will be handling our response here at St. Mark's please feel free to contact me.

9. Finally, this is a moment in time. It will not last forever, but it may make for a different kind of Lent and Easter season. We will come through the crisis and we will need the help of the entire community to do so. We plan to maintain our operational continuity to the best of our abilities and to continue to offer meaningful worship and community life along the way. Thank you for your understanding, loving care and your faith as we continue to “Build something beautiful for God in our neighborhood.”