

A Pastoral Message from the Moderator

April 1, 2020

Hello Friends,

It's hard to believe that Holy Week is almost here. Back when this COVID-19 outbreak was just beginning in North America, many of us were thinking that things would be "back to normal" by Easter, certainly. Boy, were we wrong about that! And now we're all scrambling to get ready for Holy Week services online or Easter sermons and prayers distributed by mail. It looks like we're going to be doing church a little differently for a while.

I've noticed that one of the things that a lot of ministers are doing differently is that we're paying attention to what other churches are doing. We're watching each other's worship services online and we're reading each other's sermons. It's not a competition, you know, to see whose service get the most views or the most likes. But it could be an opportunity to nurture each other in faith and encourage each other in life and ministry through this difficult time.

I may be an unusual Presbyterian minister, in that I've been listening to other preachers every week for almost twenty years. Ever since I met my Roman Catholic husband, we've attended both churches together on a regular basis. Last weekend, on the fifth Sunday in Lent, I led worship for my congregation online with my husband doing the video, and then later we "attended" mass at Resurrection Roman Catholic Parish here in Regina, at which our friend Archbishop Don Bolen was preaching.

In the morning, when I preached on the story of the raising of Lazarus, I had suggested that we might place ourselves in the story as Martha or Mary. Imagine what it must have been like for them to wait and worry, attempting to care for their seriously-ill brother, desperately trying to keep him alive without the knowledge or resources they needed to do so. It seemed comparable to our collective fight against the current pandemic. And I invited our community to look for the ways in which Jesus is showing up among us—standing beside us, crying with us in our sorrow, and assuring us that there is hope because he is the resurrection and the life.

Archbishop Don went in another direction with the same text. Instead of connecting with the experience of Mary and Martha, he invited us to imagine ourselves in the place of Lazarus in the story. Most of us have been sheltering at home for a while now. We're closed off in our houses or apartments, and perhaps we also are beginning to stink! As much as we may wish to be freed from our bondage, to get back to our normal lives, and hear that wonderful call, "Lazarus, come out!" we need to stay where we are for a while yet.

Archbishop Don reflected on the witness of people who have had near-death experiences, and he noted that afterwards, their lives rarely go "back to normal." Indeed, they very often change their priorities, adjust their plans, and live differently in light of the fact that their lives nearly came to an abrupt end. He pondered how Lazarus' life must have been impacted by what

happened to him. And he invited us to ponder how our lives might be different too, after the collective trauma of this pandemic, after the time spent at home with only our closest family members, after the loss and the grief and the struggle of these days.

We long for the day when we will be released from isolation and physical distancing so we can get back to work, and back to school, and be together in community in so many different ways. But I hope that we'll also keep some of the good practices that we are learning through this process – spending time with our families, connecting intentionally with those who are regularly homebound, reaching out in new ways to people on the margins of our communities, and maybe going out for walks in wide open spaces where the beauty of God's Creation is so evident.

My life and plans have been impacted by the cancellation of the General Assembly and the fact that I will now continue in the role of Moderator for an extra year. But I'm working with the Committee to Advise with the Moderator and with the General Assembly Office to figure out what serving as the Moderator might look like in these days when we cannot travel, or visit, or gather. I'll be sharing pastoral messages a little more often. You'll be hearing my voice, sometimes in the written word and sometimes in video messages like this one.

I'm disappointed that the visits we had planned from the middle of March and going forward all had to be cancelled. But I'm looking forward to connecting with presbyteries and other ministries through video conferences and webinars in the coming months. Across the country, I know that we're all just trying to adjust to this new reality right now, but soon I would love to visit with you and hear about how you are continuing ministry and mission in exciting ways, and how God's Spirit continues to be at work among you.

Remember that you are not alone, that your congregation is not alone; because you belong to the family that is The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Indeed, you belong to the family that is the Christian Church throughout the world, joined together to Christ who is our head.

Earlier this week, I joined with many others in signing a *Message to Canadians from Religious Leaders in Canada in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Titled, *Hope, Gratitude and Solidarity*, the statement represents a broad spectrum of churches and other religions raising "our collective voices to highlight the necessity for greater attention to the needs of the homeless, the incarcerated, the elderly and those already suffering from social isolation" as well as others in our society who are particularly vulnerable.

"We urge all people in Canada to listen and follow the directions of our public health officials and government leaders... and we pledge to lead by example. We all must act together in confronting this virus." Deep gratitude is expressed for health care workers and others who continue to work in essential services, for governments across Canada and religious leaders who are bearing particularly heavy burdens at this time.

The statement reminds us that “In spite of the present sufferings, which can seem overwhelming at times, the flames of hope cannot be extinguished. Let us witness hope to each other and so become beacons of light during these uncertain times.” Together we pray that “in the face of COVID-19, we respond with an abundance of hope, gratitude and solidarity, trusting in the loving and ever merciful God, the source of all hope.”

Last week, Pope Francis invited all Christians to join our hearts in prayer in the words that Jesus taught us; and ecumenical councils of churches echoed his invitation to pray together for the world in the midst of this pandemic. Please join me, and all our siblings in Christ, as we lift up our prayers to God, our loving Parent:

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the king, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

Blessings to you this Holy Week, and may your Easter Season be full of love, joy, and hope for the future.

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