

Greetings, this month Loretta Ramstad, a Living Grace leadership team member, who also serves on the Mutual Ministry Team, SMART Team and Transformational Ministry Team, has graciously agreed to share in our newsletter this devotional/writing she wrote for one of our meetings. I think she sums up beautifully how much we long to be in worship, but there are changes that have happened with the COVID-19 Pandemic, some of which have been horrible, some good, and others may be encouraging us to keep moving forward, and not look back at the way things were. My hope in sharing this, is that it can be food for thought as we continue to be God's church in unprecedented times.
God's Peace, Pr. Hope

Some Thoughts on the Pandemic
by Loretta Ramstad, Living Grace Leadership Team Member

Dear Friends, I come to share a few of my personal thoughts with you on the pandemic we currently find ourselves in and its effect on Living Grace and its ministry.

When will things get back to normal? Hopefully never. If we have gone through these months since March with all the pain of illness, death, isolation, financial loss, job loss, social unrest, injustice, rioting, etc., to just go back after the pandemic to where we were before the pandemic, what a hopeless loss. If we believe in God's promise that He is always making things new, we must look forward to something new, building on our past but always looking ahead to where God is leading us, as He has led us from our beginning, to a new "normal," a more faithful, more loving, more God-honoring normal.

Why can't we re-open right now for in-person worship when schools, stores, restaurants, bars, etc., are open? Good question. My response: because we are the Church. We take our direction from God, not from the secular world. We recall that we are all made in the image of God and that he has given us dominion over the earth. We have a responsibility to care for ourselves, others, and the world we live in as God would have us care for them in every circumstance, including during a global pandemic.

When can we go back to in-person worship? I don't know. I terribly miss my Living Grace brothers and sisters, and I know others share that loss. But we cannot always do what we want and we need to attempt to do the right thing. At Living Grace we are in a unique situation. We worship at the Garrick Theatre, a building we do not own and over which we do not have control. Our Synod and ELCA Churchwide has provided a number of helpful guidelines and advice on resuming in-person worship. There are many safety protocols suggested for the building, including disinfecting areas, allowing for social distancing, checking the air exchange system. There are also safety protocols on managing the people who participate in worship including mandating masks, encouraging social distancing, regulating entrances and exits, and more.

Gran, Park, Rollag, and Living Grace Lutheran Churches have instituted a collaboration "Smart Team" to establish plans and protocols for re-opening when that time comes, and that time might be different for each church. At this time, however, with infection rates going up in so many locations, including locally, going back to in-person worship does not appear to be the loving or prudent or even possible thing to do. Our Synod Bishop Bill Tesch has counseled that it is best to wait to resume in-person worship until everyone feels safe to participate. Scripture tells us "Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." Romans 13:10 and ". . .not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." Philippians 2:4. The story of Jesus is the story of sacrifice. "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of

atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.” Romans 3:25.

How, then, can we refuse to sacrifice what we might want for the sake of others?

So, then, what do we do now:

The doors to the building we worship in are closed, but does that mean that the ministry of GPR Parish and Living Grace is closed as well? Indeed, it does not. We are blessed with a multitude of ways to engage in worship, Bible study, and fellowship on-line and in other ways. Pr. Hope and Pr. Jim provide wonderful Sunday worship services that can be accessed at will on YouTube. Other on-line activities can be found on our websites.

Why not commit to some other faith practice -- increase your reading of Scripture; get a One-Year Bible and read the whole thing! Read the Psalms of lament (I rather believe God does not sit up on His throne when his people and his world are in such pain and such trouble; rather I believe God laments with us at such times). And at all times, pray. We are told when we don't have the words, the Holy Spirit will intercede for us. "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans." Romans 8:26.

Last Sunday in a locally televised worship service, the pastor asked, "Is your vision 20/20 in 2020?" As members of the Church, do we see beyond ourselves and clearly see the pain and the needs of others that have intensified during this time of global pandemic – our family, our church family, our neighbors, both locally and globally. Do we see the needs of parents dealing with changing on-site and off-site school schedules; the needs of the elderly, many of whom are isolated away from family and friends for safety; the needs of those who have lost jobs to the pandemic; those living in refugee camps with no masks, no social distancing, and no hope. Pray that the Holy Spirit would lead you to discover opportunities to help. That's the Holy Spirit's job! And don't forget our Pocket Prayer Shawl ministry. God can use those little squares to cover his people with his love. What a time to let those Pocket Prayer Shawls just fall like rain on God's people. "The King will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" Matthew 25:40.

We also ought not forget the strain this pandemic has put on Pr. Hope, Pr. Jim, and Youth Director Andrea. They have had to institute and manage new ways to worship, new and innovative ways to interact with parishioners and others, and new ways to continue and encourage the ministries of the four churches. And what a superb job they are doing! Now more than ever, they need and deserve our unending gratitude, prayer and support.

These are just some of my thoughts as we try to navigate our way through this new and challenging landscape of 2020. Thank you for your patience in reading this, and please share any thoughts, insights, or questions you may have.

Stay safe and be well. And, as always, thanks be to God!

Loretta Ramstad