

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Good Friday, April 10, 2020

Almighty God, look with pity upon the sorrows of your servants. Remember them, Lord, in your mercy; nourish them with patience; comfort them with a sense of your goodness; lift up your countenance upon them; and give them peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

That prayer was from our prayer book and is designated for the time of death. It is to be prayed over the gathered family and friends who are deeply grieving the loss of the loved one who has just died. This prayer is also for us in our current time of grief and loss.

I prayed this prayer earlier this week, when a parishioner died at home, surrounded by her six adopted children, after suffering a long battle with cancer. While death is not a novel human experience, in these times of the coronavirus pandemic, there are novel pastoral constraints. After receiving the call that she had died, I went to the family's home to pray last rites. Upon entering the household, I was unable to physically comfort her children. No hugs, holding of hands, or comforting touches of shoulders were possible. I wore a face mask and vinyl gloves. I could not confer my own body warmth to comfort. And of my face, they could only see my eyes.

While I wasn't supposed to touch the body of the deceased, I simply had to. How else can I do this? How else can I be human in the midst of death? How do I comfort without connecting with the body? How do I commend a body and soul to God without touch?

This time of social and physical distancing has made me even more aware of our incarnated existence. We often pretend that we are spiritual beings temporarily housed in a body. But that is not the case. We do not merely *have* bodies, we *are* bodies. That is the nature of God's creation. There is no separation of our bodies from our "true spiritual self". They are more than connected, they are indivisible.

This Lent has been a season of grieving for all of us. The physical, emotional, economic, and spiritual toll is nearly overwhelming. As of this morning, Johns Hopkins reports that over 1.6 million cases of covid-19 have been diagnosed globally, and nearly 97,000 people have died from the disease. Some of us have been grieving the loss of loved ones who have died in the past weeks. Some of us have been grieving the loss of physical health. Many of us have been grieving the loss of employment and financial security. And all of us have been grieving the loss public life; of the comfort of routine; of the connection with each other that can only be truly satisfied when we gather physically – in person; in our bodies.

One thing that has kept me grounded thus far has been our ability to lead worship from our sanctuary. I know how important it has been for you to see this space – see our altar, stained glass window, and cross. I know that to see us in this space has provided the comfort of a familiar touchstone for many of you when it seems that everything else has been taken away. And I know that leading worship every day from here has provided that same touchstone of comfort for me.

This Lent has been a season in which week by week – and sometimes day by day – another cherished ritual or activity is taken away. And when there isn't much else of our ordinary lives to lose, we find ourselves grieving even yet another loss. So, it with great sadness that I say that that our Holy Week and Easter Sunday services will be the last ones we livestream from our sanctuary for the time being. Per the instructions of the Diocese of Virginia, our weekday and Sunday services after this Sunday will continue but will be livestreamed from home. With the pandemic predicted to peak in this area in the coming weeks, we must relinquish even this last privilege to do our part in our collective sacrifice to protect the vulnerable. We must stay home – you, you, and me.

While it is true that the Church transcends the building, place does matter. Place is important – physically and symbolically. And, while it is also true that we are more than bodies,

bodies do matter. Bodies are important. We are enfleshed, incarnated creatures. Our buildings matter because we build them, we inhabit them, we experience the joys and tragedies of life within them. Our loss of place – of places of worship, of work, of dining and fellowship, of entertainment and recreation – these are very real losses and we grieve them powerfully.

This Coronavirus pandemic has been a strange fight. In times of war, we can be active - there are things we can do, together. But in this global struggle, our greatest work is what we don't do – what we give up – what we fast. We are called to sacrifice our deepest human impulses and desires – to gather together; to touch; to console with a hug; to hold another's hand; to put our arms around each other; to lean in close in order to communicate our feelings; to break bread together and share a meal; to inhabit our various places which are meaningful in our lives. Instead, we must physically isolate at our homes.

The Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is best known for her definition of the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. For most of us who have grieved deeply, we would recognize all these stages but might question the implication that we necessarily progress from one stage to another in a linear fashion. Rather, it has been my experience that I cycle through these “stages” multiple times. I think of them more as emotional states of grief rather than “stages” one progresses through – one to the next.

This week, I have been cycling through **all** these emotional states. I have repeatedly retreated into the comfort of denial when my emotions start to overwhelm me. I have erupted with surprising anger at the unfairness of it all – often directing my anger at inconsequential offenses rather than the true source. I have tried to contain my grief by bargaining with God, the Diocese, the Governor, and myself. I have descended into weary despair and despondency when my denial, anger, and bargaining ultimately fail to change anything. I have experienced fleeting moments of acceptance of the situation and my lack of control or power over it, save my staying home and vigilant. And sometimes I have experienced all of this before seven in the morning.

My friends, even though our sanctuary will also close to us after our Easter Sunday celebrations, we do not lose hope. Place is important and the grief that comes from the loss of it is real – yet we continue to walk in the faith that God will meet us wherever we are. For we know that God is not contained solely within our Good Shepherd sanctuary. God's sacred tabernacle is Creation and God may be found everywhere.

Today, we sit in the emptiness of death – we sit with our grief, our longing, and our sadness. We sit with our denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. We sit in the lonely silence – in the absence of physical closeness – but we do not despair. For, our God is one who knows our suffering. The wonder of the incarnation of Christ is that our God so loved His creation that he took on human flesh and lived – and died – among us. Through Jesus' birth, life, love, suffering, and death, God has been united with his beloved creation and knows our strengths and our failings. God knows our joys and our pains. God knows how we love and how we suffer, and God is present with us in our grief and loss. In life and in death, God is with us, even when we may not feel His presence.

We are promised that nothing, not even death, separates us from God's love. While today we live in the emptiness of death, we hold tight to the promise of Easter – of resurrection, restoration, and renewal of life. May God grant us the clarity of vision, the keenness of hearing, and fortitude of hope to see God's renewing grace at work in the world even today. And may we seek and find the subtle signs of God's loving and restoring Spirit moving about us – always active, always available, always waiting to be received into our thirsty hearts.

Amen.