

April 4, 2020

Friends in Christ---

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor. 13:14)

Here we are amidst a time of confusion, news inundation, and worship service suspension. As you know, worship services were suspended through March 30th. Now, on April 4th, please let me share with you that worship services are suspended through May 12th. This decision, reached at the most recent church council meeting, has been gut-wrenching and energy-draining. Who but Jesus could ever have foreseen a day when Christians would be asking Christians not to gather together for the purpose of worshiping Jesus as a single family united in God's grace around God's Table?

Governor DeSantis, days after church council met, defines "*attending religious services conducted in churches, synagogues, and houses of worship*" as an essential service. While this seems faithful and admirable, it is impractical for our congregation. Our worship space would feel stunningly sad were only ten of us to inhabit a worship service at a time. Wouldn't we ache for absent friends, and wouldn't we also increase our risk of exposure to COVID-19? Further, should our meeting together cause a member or visitor to contract COVID-19, might we prove culpable and be open to civil suit? The answer to both is, "yes." The reality of culpability has been the subject of much discussion with ELCA and synodical legal teams in recent weeks. As the saying goes, "Prudence is the better part of valor."

As mentioned in the last letter, "out of love and from deep concern for those who gather as JOY, for those who come to us as visitors and friends, and particularly for those most vulnerable to the virus:"

- **There will be no public worship at JOY until May 12th Sunday Service, earlier if conditions change. (Hopefully conditions will soon change)**
- **All events, committee meetings, etc., and activities are also suspended.**

Until public worship and church activities resume, avail yourselves of the following:

- The Sunday sermon and readings will be made available via our website. The JOY website (<https://www.joylutheranelca.com>) has great value to our congregation and this is a time when it can serve us very well. A youtube channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCW_OdupNMdDmVK5X9hzYMAg?view_as=subscriber) has been established to provide abbreviated worship services and other information.
- Committees with an urgent need to meet during this suspension, are invited to call me to schedule either a Google Hangout, Skype, or Zoom videoconference.

- The Stephen Ministry leader, Elaine Heine, has divided the congregation into manageable call lists. Calls are being made to offer a listening ear, to support connection, and to nurture the sense of belonging that is so central to who we are as JOY Lutheran Church. We need one another. We are all in this together.
- Until decided otherwise, Brenda Goodson, Pastor's secretary, will work from home. She is currently assisting pastor with returning calls, managing correspondence, and with identifying member needs. Pastor Bryant is dropping by the office once per day to sort mail, return urgent messages, etc. Email (joylutheranpb@gmail.com) is an effective means to reach out to Brenda. To email Pr. Bryant directly, use prjdbryant4tide@gmail.com. If you have a need that is truly urgent, call Pr. Bryant directly #321.312.7339.
- If you have not already done so, sign up to receive Tidings of JOY, our newsletter, via email. This will help keep us connected.
- Please mail your offerings and contributions directly to the church: JOY Lutheran Church, 3174 Jupiter Blvd SE, Palm Bay, FL 32909. Our expenses do not suspend, even if our time together is temporarily suspended. Your generosity is appreciated.

Allow me to remind you again exactly *who-we-are* and *Whose-we-are*. We are the children of God; we belong to God. This doesn't change even though we are physically apart. We are never off of God's radar, to turn a phrase.

Psalm 139: 7-12 says, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol (the dwelling place of the dead) you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

God bless and keep you,
 JDB+
 Pr. J. David Bryant+