

Church Services Pentecost May 31, 8:30 a.m., 11:00 a.m.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ,

Peace and strength be yours in the Name of the crucified, risen, and ascended Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, our righteousness.

We are pleased to announce the return of the Divine Services at St. Paul's. The past several weeks have been challenging in many ways, not the least of which has been the Church's worship life. Many thanks to Eric, Heather, Anita, Wayne and Candice for producing the Services you have received in your home since March 25. The Board of Elders in their recent meeting determined to continue producing the "online" Services, provided new volunteers arise.

The Board of Elders also determined a certain protocol toward reinstating regular Services. Before you examine the protocol, which may change as conditions change, may I express a few carefully chosen and sensitive words for your consideration.

Protocol Rationale

As you can imagine, I have spoken to many parish members and pastors and family members and community residents in the recent weeks. Nearly each one has a different opinion of the pandemic, as well as a different level of concern with respect to safety. Some view the pandemic as a hyped-up political tactic. Others view the pandemic as a highly infectious and deadly scourge upon the earth. Still others view the pandemic as a mixture of the aforementioned views. With respect to safety, some take lightly the practice of masking, distancing, sanitization, etc., while others wear attire nearly identical to a hazmat suit and shower 4 or 5 times daily. Still others practice safety measures incorporating a mixture of the aforementioned.

Within our congregation and undoubtedly within the assembled congregation on May 31 and following, are represented the above opinions.

The Word of God speaks about **loving one's neighbor**, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself*" [Matthew 22:37, 39]. God's Word also addresses the sin of **offending one's neighbor**, which is not "loving" one's neighbor [Romans 14:1 – 15:7] --- "*We then that are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of the weak, and not to please ourselves*" [Romans 15:1]. In other words, we must, in love, bear with our neighbor in his weakness.

For example, if one's neighbor is deemed to be "weak" because he is afraid of the virus and takes every precaution to avoid it, but attends church Services to receive the Sacrament, he must be honored; he must not be offended by another who considers himself "strong" and the virus harmless. The opposite scenario *deems one's neighbor "weak" because he is not afraid of the virus and takes no precautions to protect himself, and therefore must be honored; he must not be offended by another who considers himself "afraid" of the virus.* Comparing the two reveals a conflict which, in this case, is resolved by a governing authority --- government, one aspect of God's provision for His world. The government, established by God, is to be obeyed, in so far as it does not violate the Word of God.

In our particular case --- the government of the State of Michigan, personal protection and distancing are required at the present time. Since requiring personal protection and distancing does not violate the Word of God, we honor the man who is afraid of the virus and insists on the requirements of the government, and do not honor the man who is not afraid of the virus and violates the requirements of the government.

Bringing this understanding to our local congregation, knowing that some within our congregation are afraid of the virus but desire to attend church Services and receive the Sacrament --- trusting that their Christian neighbors will obey the government, we respectfully present the following.

Protocol

As we return to a regular pattern of worship at St. Paul's, please observe as many of the following as possible.

1. If you are sick --- especially with a fever or cough, remain home.
2. If you are part of a "high-risk" group [chronic illness, weak], remain home.
3. If possible, monitor your body temperature at home prior to the Service.
4. Wearing of masks is strongly encouraged --- bring your own mask please --- your neighbor will expect you to wear a mask.
5. Wearing of gloves is optional.
6. Hand-sanitizing upon entry is required --- the congregation has a reasonable supply.
7. Handshaking and hugging are prohibited.
8. Pew seating is marked "8:30" & "11:00", non-family members maintain a 6' distance.
9. Coffee-hour and fellowship before and after the Services is suspended.
10. Most doors, including restroom doors, will remain semi-open [minimal surface contact].
11. Service bulletins which include the texts to the Liturgy and hymns will be available on a table as you enter, and will be pre-mailed to your home via email; we respectfully request, if possible, that you print a copy at home and/or bring your own hymnal.
12. All items in the pew racks, including hymnals, are temporarily removed.
13. A cantor is introduced to offset any muffled singing and responses brought about by masks.

14. Offering plates will be handled only by the Ushers.
15. Weather permitting, windows will be open.
16. The Pastor, wearing a mask, will greet members before and after the Services, maintaining a 6' distance. Some members may not wish to greet him or anyone else.

The following pertain to the distribution of Holy Communion.

17. The Pastor, wearing a mask, will distribute the bread and Body of Christ, sanitizing his hands prior to placing the wafer into the hand of the communicant. The Elder on duty, wearing a mask, will distribute the wine and Blood of Christ, following the sanitization of his hands.
18. Hand sanitizer will be available at the Communion rail.
19. Plastic cups will [temporarily] be used in place of glass cups and will be disposed by the communicant into a container at each end of the Communion rail.
20. Communicants are requested to consume all contents of the cup.
21. Five communicants will constitute "a table," receiving the Sacrament while kneeling, distancing themselves as marked on the Communion rail.

May we insist during these challenging days that no judgmental attitudes prevail --- may the church be known as a *"no judgment zone."* Again, everyone has a different opinion regarding the threat of the virus and a different level of concern regarding safety. Thank you for exercising patience and understanding with one another. The leaders of our congregation are *"doing the best they can"* to keep us all safe and united. Please keep them in your prayers, as well as one another.

Finally, may we confess that our safety ultimately comes from God, Who says to His children, *"Fear not, for I Am with thee; be not dismayed, for I Am thy God; I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the Right Hand of My righteousness"* [Isaiah 41:10]. Certainly attending Divine Services to hear His Word and receive His Sacrament is a time not of danger nor a threatening time, but a time of blessing, a time for rejoicing. Believe His words. Trust His ability to keep you safe.

Questions and concerns and comments are welcome --- please address them to me as you desire. Thank you.

May God bless you with continued protection and His guidance.

In Christ,
Pastor Rutter