

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

COVID-19 has been a challenge to the church, though we have gotten a good idea of how many of our leaders view the church. When Governor Gavin Newsom of California issued his stay-at-home order, his state government identified “essential critical infrastructure sectors.” The church was not found in that 14-page document; religious activity was not considered essential; pastors were not among the “Essential Workforce.” Similarly in Nevada, Governor Sisolak put out a directive identifying essential and non-essential businesses. Again, “church” and “religious” were not words found in that document. Indeed, his later actions made it clear how he viewed the church—it was of less importance than casinos.

I wrote about this in the August Voice. A Nevada church asked for injunctive relief from the governor’s unfair treatment of churches. Sadly, the Supreme Court denied that relief. As Justice Gorsuch wrote in dissent, “In Nevada, it seems, it is better to be in entertainment than religion. Maybe that is nothing new.” Maybe, but not if you asked the crowd in our Gospel lesson.

In our Gospel lesson Jesus went out to “*a desolate place by himself*” our text says. As we might say it today, He went out to the middle of nowhere to be by Himself. He had just heard of the gruesome murder of John the Baptist; He needed to be by Himself; He needed to grieve; He needed to pray.

But the crowd would not let Him. No, to them Jesus was anything but non-essential. Jesus went by boat; the crowd followed on foot so that they could be with Him. And Jesus did not disappoint. He had compassion on the crowd, the Gospel says. As they hurt, He hurt. As they worried, He worried. As they were grieved, He grieved. No surface thing. Jesus felt it down deep.

It is, of course, characteristic of God to be compassionate. Just two verses past our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah speaks of the Lord’s compassion. And a few chapters later, Isaiah says, “*I will recount the steadfast love of the LORD, the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has granted us ... according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love*” (Is. 63:7). David sings similarly, “*As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him*” (Psalm 103:13).

Compassion is also part of the humanity that Jesus assumed into His divine Person—to be able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses. The writer to the Hebrews says, “*we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses*” (Heb. 4:15), though He Himself did not sin. He could sympathize with our hurts, for He Himself was “*despised and rejected.*” He Himself was “*stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*” He Himself “*was pierced [and] crushed.*” He was punished; He was wounded (Is. 53:3-5). He could sympathize with our temptations

because He was “*in every respect ... tempted as we are*” (Heb. 4:15). He could sympathize with our griefs, for He experienced tragic death even as we do.

But His sympathy did not lead to a pity party. No, in Jesus, the Son of God, compassion leads to mercy. He was grieving His cousin’s death, but His needs would have to wait as the crowd pressed in on Him. Jesus had mercy on the crowd and healed their sick. Jesus was anything but non-essential. Divine mercy poured out of Him, as Jesus did what God alone could do—we call them miracles.

But He wasn’t done. The crowd stayed with Jesus till it was late. “*Send them away,*” the disciples said to Jesus. Let them go down to “*the villages and buy food for themselves.*” But Jesus wasn’t having it. Still oozing with compassion, Jesus told the disciples to feed the crowd. The disciples objected: “All we have are these loaves and fish, and that’s not enough even for a handful of this crowd.” Jesus was not deterred; “*bring them to me,*” He said. And He proceeded to feed the crowd with this meager morsel — Jesus, the Son of God, again, doing another miracle.

It’s not clear that the crowd recognized the miracle, but Jesus’ disciples surely did. They knew what Jesus started with. They witnessed Jesus giving thanks and breaking the loaves. They themselves distributed the food to the thousands seated on the grass. They saw how everyone ate till they were full. They gathered up the twelve baskets of leftovers. And all four evangelists, some writing for the apostles, wrote of this miracle in their accounts of Jesus. This miracle may not be of the same significance as healing miracles, or casting out demons, or raising the dead — I don’t think anyone was about to die of hunger. Nevertheless, this miracle reminds us that God Himself is the supplier of our daily bread, that is, “everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body” (Luther, Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer 4th Petition), and Jesus considered such bodily needs as essential as our governors do who kept grocery stores open but closed or restricted churches.

We don’t disagree with our governors that daily bread is essential. That’s why we pray for it all the time. But we also know, for Moses and Jesus taught it, that “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*” (Matt. 4:4). Therefore, with this miracle Jesus is signaling not only that He is not non-essential, but also that His body, the church, is not non-essential, too.

Now that’s in large part because of the essential things that Jesus does still through His church. He cleanses us by the washing of water and the word and “works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation” (Luther, Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, Part 2), as He did for Elias Mark today through baptism as the Spirit came upon him today and made him a child of promise (Rom. 9:8). Jesus came to feed us not just with “*the food that perishes, but ... the food that endures to eternal life*” (John 6:27). That’s why we often pray that we may “inwardly digest” the Holy Scriptures, for this is the “*rich*

food” the prophet Isaiah calls us to delight in by listening “*diligently to [Him], and [eating] what is good.*” And, of course, Jesus came to feed us with “*the living bread that came down from heaven,*” Jesus’ own flesh and blood eaten in the Lord’s Supper, given “*for the life of the world*” (John 6:51). Yes, this Supper is hinted at by Jesus’ actions: He took bread; He gave thanks; He broke it; He gave it.

And these are the essential things of the church that Pastor Harrison wrote about in his little pamphlet: “The Church Is a Mercy Place!”—this is “the essential nature of the church’s ‘marks’ (Gospel and sacrament) that tell us surely where the church is present.” Yet, they are not the only things of the church. Pastor Harrison wrote, “[t]he crowds pursued [Jesus] for bread, not the bread of life, yet He did not cease to deliver both (John 6).” Quoting Wilhelm Loehe, “God’s mercy ... is divine love meeting need. When divine mercy meets human sin, that mercy becomes the grace of forgiveness. When divine love meets human suffering, it becomes merciful care and healing.” Therefore, while affirming the essentials, Pastor Harrison wrote, “we dare not miss the fact that love and mercy toward the needy mark the church’s corporate life.” Did you hear it? “Corporate?” The church is Christ’s *corpus*, His body, and guided by its head, the church is a mercy place!

Thus, even as Jesus is not non-essential as He fills our need both body and soul, so also the church is not non-essential, giving the same. We see it in the midst of this COVID pandemic. When especially those “*of the household of faith*” (Gal. 6:10) were in need, the church was there to give comfort and aid. Sadly, though, many are staying away from the gathering of fellow believers, and these, according to Barna Research, are feeling additional emotional strain, from anxiety to boredom to insecurity (www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2). We pray they come back, for if we agree that Jesus is not non-essential, then neither is His church, for that’s where He continues to serve with compassion and mercy.

Of course, the church does this in all sorts of ways from local congregations reaching out to neighbors with food vouchers, assistance with clothing or shoes or housing (I just did that this week), to our city-wide agencies—Lutheran Social Services, Cross Connections, Bethesda, Lutheran Life Villages, etc. You know well that, although it only bears the name of Lutheran now, Lutheran Hospital was begun by Lutherans in Fort Wayne showing compassion and mercy to our neighbors. And you’re familiar with our Synodwide agencies; LCMS World Relief and Human Care is one. As her Lord shows mercy, so the church is a mercy place!

Jesus bears witness today by miracles of healing and feeding that He is not non-essential. Even in the face of unjust treatment by our government, God grant that His Church, overflowing with the abundance of Jesus’ own provision, may show herself likewise to be not non-essential but a place of compassion and mercy.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.