

Like many people, I enjoy playing games on my phone. I find it to be a relaxing pass time. I play sudoku. I play word games. I play those block puzzles that remind me of Tetris, even though they're not called that. And yet sometimes I wonder, as I lose myself in a half hour of figuring out a word to solve a puzzle to gain points in an imaginary world, what could I be doing if I weren't doing this?

Would I read more? Would I go to bed at a more reasonable hour? Would my pictures be in better order? Would I stay better in touch with friends and family members far and near? Would I be more present to my surroundings? Would my time be better spent?

Of course, I have known all along deep in my heart that the answer to all of those questions is yes.

So, on February 26<sup>th</sup>, as I woke up on Ash Wednesday, I decided that I would give up those phone video games for Lent this year, in the hopes that God would use this new little discipline of mine to help me be more faithful with my time; a better steward of my time.

At first it was a pretty simple thing to do. I didn't even find myself missing the games that much. I was going to bed earlier and getting more sleep. I did find myself with more time for things that were more important to me than games on a screen.

But then, of course, everything changed.

About two weeks into Lent, I, like the rest of you, found myself being asked to give up almost everything. Going out to eat, going to the store, except for essentials, going to the doctor, except for life or death types of situations, seeing my parents, having guests in our home, sending my kids to school, spending time with the other moms on the playground after school while our kids played.

And, of course, I was asked, we all were asked to give up in person worship, and as a subset of that, communion. This Lent, circumstances have required us to fast from Holy Communion.

And while, next week, on Easter Sunday, if I want to, I can pull out my phone video games again, I know that our fast from Holy Communion will not end with Easter this year. It will not end until it is safe for us and for the larger community around us for us to gather for worship in person again.

You might have heard that some of our neighboring churches of other denominations, and even some other Lutheran churches, have been having on-line, also called virtual, communion. You might have heard of churches having drive-thru communion. You might have heard of some churches trying to deliver communion by drone. You might have heard of pastors going out to homes and neighborhoods, to give communion to small groups of people.

I actually thought of doing that one and then realized that me, moving from house to house, could potentially be just as bad as us being together, due to the dangers of asymptomatic transmission of Covid-19. In addition to that, me traveling from house to house would violate our governor's stay at home advisory, which was put into place for the safety and well-being of all people, as I understand it, so that just wouldn't work.

There are ways that pastors and clergy-people of all denominations are trying to find creative ways around this strange Lent and beyond time of fasting that we find ourselves in. You might have wondered why we're not doing something like that.

Know that this is not a criticism of any other church's beliefs or practices, just a statement of our own. For us, as Lutheran Christians, communion at a distance or individualized, simply does not fit with our understand of what communion is.

Communion is a sacrament that requires pastors and community in each other's physical presence. It is not an emotional connection, it is not symbolic,

it is the true presence of God coming to be with God's gathered people, feeding us individually and as a community of faith, for our shared mission and ministry in the world.

Communion that takes place outside of communal worship, like communion to our sick or homebound members of the church, in their homes or in hospitals or nursing homes, flows from that experience of communal worship.

In other words, it is shared by the gathered community with those who, for reasons beyond their control, cannot be a part of communal worship.

So, long distance communion does not fit with our understanding of communion as a sacrament,

But you know what fit into our understanding of faith? Lament, like I talked about in my sermon last week, times when we acknowledge that life is not going the way that we want and need it to, times when we cry out, "How long", times when we recognize that there is some disconnect between what we have and what we yearn for, even as we trust that God is still at work to bring life and salvation to us and to all people.

Our Bishop, Jim Hazelwood, has encouraged us to avoid getting imaginative about ways that we could deliver communion to people, but instead, to get creative about the ways we can be in communion with each other, the way that we can care for each other, even at a distance, ways we can experience God's presence in stillness and silence and in the midst of worry and sickness.

I know that the first time that I am able to preside at Holy Communion again, with you gathered here, in our beautiful, church, I'll probably cry. Tears of joy might be running down my face as I lift the bread and the cup as I see your faces in person again, and as we celebrate that God has brought us through to the other side of this strange time of fasting and loss and sickness and dread.

But in the meantime, while we fast from Holy Communion, I believe that we will experience God in other ways, in the stories that we will share this Holy Week,

in the songs that we will sing, in the unfolding of the spring, in the healing work of so many around us, in the ways that we will care for each other, even in the meals we eat, that we begin by giving thanks, “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, let these gifts to us be blessed.”

I know that, while we can't celebrate the sacrament right now, God will still find ways to reach us, still be in communion with us. Because no matter what, God is still Emmanuel; God is still with us. Amen.