

*So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. [Galatians 6:9-10]*

Dear people of God in the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

A few weeks ago I was pleasantly surprised to hear the Governor of Ohio, Mark DeWine, quote from Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians (cited above) as he appealed to Ohioans to wear face masks in public.

Before going any further, let me state unequivocally my support for the Governor's leadership during these trying times. He has had to make tough decisions, consulting with those who have the necessary knowledge and expertise to help him arrive at the conclusions that he thinks are best for the people of Ohio. Not everyone has always been pleased. But one mark of a good leader is to make decisions for the sake of all, not just a few, regardless of how unpopular those decisions may be. I would urge all of us to keep him and all legislative leaders in prayer, especially during these challenging times. As the apostle Paul also encourages us in his first letter to Timothy:

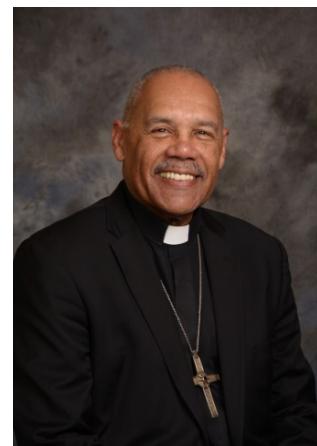
"First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and

dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior." [1 Tim 2:1-3]

As we return, or consider returning to in-person worship, the question of wearing a face mask has generated a variety of responses in some congregations. It's been interesting, to say the least, to observe people's reactions. Some have enthusiastically embraced the idea, while others are reluctant to do so. The many different approaches have created the potential for division. In some cases, that division has erupted into full-blown wars.

Now that masks are a state mandate, you would think that would put an end to the debates. But human nature being what it is, there are those who are still resistant. I pray that as you resume or consider resuming in-person worship, that you take the words of Paul's letter to the Galatians to heart, "let us work for the good of all."

Many, if not all of us, hoped that the ravages of this COVID-19 pandemic would have subsided by now. If anything, the opposite is true. We are experiencing spikes in infections and, as of this writing, the death toll is approaching 150,000.



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The world has withstood pandemics before. However, this is the first in our lifetime that has reached such devastating proportions.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the bubonic plague wiped out nearly one-third of the population of western Europe. According to Anna Marie Johnson, the initial outbreak began in 1347 and abated in 1353, but reappeared in five-to-twelve year cycles throughout the fourteenth century, and in longer intervals thereafter.<sup>i</sup>

The clergy of Breslau, Germany, asked Martin Luther whether clergy could flee home and labors on account of the plague.<sup>ii</sup> His response was a treatise titled, *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*.

Johnson characterizes Luther's response as thoroughly pragmatic. Of course, she notes, the people asking the question obviously had somewhere to go, or the means to do so. As in our time, the plague disproportionately affected the poor harder than the affluent.

There was a part of the treatise that drew my attention. Luther points out that, "If a neighbor's house is on fire, love compels me to run to help them extinguish the flames." He goes on to cite other examples, and concludes his thoughts with these words: "Those who will not help or support others unless they can do so without affecting their safety or property will never help their neighbor. We must run the risk that fire or some other accident will start in our neighbor's house and destroy us bodily or deprive us of our goods, spouse,

children, and all that we have. Those who do not do that for their neighbors...become murderers in the sight of God."<sup>iii</sup>

In summary, love of neighbor is what should motivate us to wear a mask, however inconvenient it may appear to us. Though Luther's tone seems rather harsh, the point is that loving our neighbor is what God asks of us. After all, God loves us and demonstrated that love in the person of Jesus, who laid down his life for us.

As we look ahead to the upcoming months, we must face the reality that this Coronavirus is going to be around for a long, long time. There is no quick fix. But something as simple as wearing a mask may help shorten the duration of the disease in some measure. As Paul advises, "let us not grow weary of doing what is right."

May our actions be motivated by our love for others, not ourselves. And may that love for others stem from our faith and trust in God's love for us.

In short, love your neighbor, wear a mask.

Peace,



+Bishop Abraham D. Allende

<sup>i</sup> Timothy Wengert, ed, *The Annotated Luther*, volume 4, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (2016) p. 385

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397