

Dear St. Paul's Family,

It has now been about six months since a congregation has gathered for worship at St. Paul's. This has been a trying time for families, individuals, for work and school, and certainly for our church community. We have been immensely blessed by the brilliant work of our technology team, which has enabled us to remain connected in corporate worship, practice spiritual communion even when we cannot be together physically, and connect with one another through Scripture, prayer, song, and joy in Christ our Savior.

Christians, however, are the “people of the incarnation,” a people who meet God among us in the real stuff of everyday life: bread, wine, water, oil, human language. We do not believe in a distant and far-off God, but a God who shows up, who comes to dwell with us as one of us in Jesus Christ. And God continues to meet us in this way. Christianity is an embodied, earthy, physical faith, and our distance from the fullness of our sacramental life, that physicality—that life of incarnation—is a painful loss.

The good news is, while we are a eucharistic community and are tied to the sacraments in our pursuit of God, God's pursuit of us is not tied to anything! God is free to love and meet us in every aspect of our lives no matter the situation, and perhaps we have met God among us in new ways during this period. That is something to rejoice in. Christ's incarnate presence with us hasn't gone anywhere—this is what it means to be the Church, to be a people indwelled and led by the Spirit.

I have found great beauty and fruitfulness in the ancient practice of spiritual communion, while at the same time feeling the loss of not gathering in the fullness of our incarnational and sacramental life together (and let's face it, you've gotten to “go to church” in your pajamas with coffee in hand while I've been looking out at empty pews and cameras!).

A few weeks ago the Diocese of Massachusetts released a document outlining strict regulations for how churches could gather again to receive communion in a safe and secure way. Well over half of the churches in our Diocese have now regathered or are in the process of regathering. At St. Paul's we have been cautious. While desiring to fully live out our life together as the Church, to be “one body because we all share in one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17), we also know that looking out for the wellbeing of that body is a central part of our calling to love one another and our neighbors. So, moving forward in this “new normal” we wanted to make sure we did not rush into anything or make any changes that could threaten that call to love.

I have said to the Vestry and Executive Committee (who is also functioning as our Regathering Committee) that I did not want to move forward with in-person worship until we were certain we could do so in a way that is safer than going to the grocery store! We believe that, with the new Diocesan guidelines, we have a creative solution for a partial regathering that more than meets that requirement. When Dr. Anthony Fauci met with the Episcopal bishops he made the point of the danger of the “all or nothing” approach—of thinking the options are either sustained total shut down or unsafe and negligent ignoring of precautions. With that in mind, we think we have developed a way forward that would allow those who are not self-isolating or vulnerable to the pandemic to gather to receive the sacrament again while at the same time not diminishing the experience of our worship together for those who cannot yet return.

With full approval of our plan from the Bishop and Diocesan officers overseeing the regathering of churches, we will soon begin open-air, outdoor, celebrations of the Eucharist (which we are affectionately calling “Mass in the Grass”!) Sunday through Thursday, enabling the maximum number of people to receive the Eucharist in the smallest gatherings possible and in the safest possible environment (receiving in one kind—bread only). People are also welcome to attend and come forward for a blessing if they do not wish to receive. We will also use an online/call in sign-up system to ensure that our numbers never exceed more than expected and we will rely upon the extensive safety regulations from the Diocese for distribution of communion (attached).

The second aspect of this plan is that our Sunday 9am online/TV service of spiritual communion with music, hymns, sermon, and our full liturgy will remain exactly as it is. I think it is critical that we do not regather in a way that will hinder our video streamed services or diminish that service due to regathering regulations, which would potentially exclude members of the congregation who cannot yet return or scale down their experience of worship from home. Our plan is to leave the 9am Sunday Eucharist exactly the same and move outside to the back yard of the church at 11am on Sunday for a short communion service that moves straight through the readings and liturgy without music or sermon, taking about 25-30 minutes. At noon Monday through Thursday we will also hold these short outdoor Eucharists. This ensures that those who are unable to return at this time or are uncomfortable doing so will lose nothing from our current experience of communal worship. I believe it would be thoughtless to diminish what we are able to offer to those who are housebound or more vulnerable to the pandemic, and so we are committed to continuing to do the best that we possibly can to keep you connected and support your life of prayer and worship and refuse to take away from it. Many churches have found brilliant ways of doing this, and we believe our multi-service outdoor plan with continued video streaming is the best way forward for St. Paul's.

I think it is important to recognize those of you who are vulnerable and self-isolating and therefore unable to return at this time and say that no one should feel guilty about not being able to come to receive communion, nor should anyone feel pressured to come. We all long to receive the sacrament, to join together in worship, and move forward in this way, but we also long deeply to care for one another with grace and patience in the best way we can given all of our particular situations. This care includes both continuing our Sunday broadcast to the highest standard we are able and also thinking creatively about other ways of meeting your pastoral needs as we move forward in this unprecedented time. We should also reflect on how the grace of the sacrament is good for our whole community, even when we cannot all be present together to receive it.

More information will be coming soon about the nature and start date of "Mass in the Grass," which we hope to be very soon. I long for the day when we can all gather together again in worship, friendship, and celebration, and this is one exciting step in that direction. In the meantime, be assured of my prayers and affection for each of you.

Every blessing,

Fr Jarred

Summary of Diocesan regulations for distribution of Holy Communion:

- The celebrant washes their hands thoroughly with soap and water before the service and/or use hand sanitizer immediately before the preparation of the Altar. After receiving the sacrament, the celebrant will use hand sanitizer again before serving others.
- All wear clean masks and remained distanced by household throughout the liturgy.
- The bread and wine are to remain covered throughout the eucharistic prayer.
- No one other than the celebrant is permitted to consume from the chalice.
- Communicants continue to wear masks and remain distanced while approaching the Communion station.
- Communion is to be distributed with the people standing, preferably in a place where there is ample space to prevent crowding.
- It is desirable to have hand sanitizer available for use by communicants as they approach and depart from the Communion station (we will make this available, and hand sanitizer will also be used by all at the entrance to and exit from the space).
- The celebrant is to drop the bread or wafer into the opened palms of the one receiving while avoiding touching their hands. Pressing the bread into the palm or delivering it on the tongue is not permitted.
- The communicant should step away from the Communion station at least six feet before lifting their mask briefly to consume the host.
- All remained masked and distanced by household while exiting.