

12 March 2020 – 4 pm

Dear Ones,

Greetings in the name of the one true and living God – Perfect Unity and Glorious Trinity.

I write to you today not as a government official or a politician, not as a doctor or a public health official, not as a member of the news media or social influencer. I write to you today as Pastor to greet you wherever you are in the midst of our current public health crisis and to inform you what our current and emerging plans are and might be as this crisis further unfolds.

The first thing that I can absolutely assure you of is that you are beloved of God – God loves you now, has always loved you, loves you through this and any other struggles, and will always love you. Wherever you are in the anxieties that may be swirling in the world, please take an occasional pause and rest in that eternal belovedness of God for you.

The second thing that I can assure you is that you are beloved by your parish community at St. Bede's. I see and know this in and through each and every one of you as you gather and go forth to live God's love and Good News in the world. You make a difference in the lives of each other. You make a difference in my life. You make a difference in the life of the world.

Being the Beloved Community of God means that we bear each other's burdens and we celebrate each other's joys. We walk together on the pilgrim road in adversity and in prosperity. And as Christ reminds us, "That which is done unto the least of my own, is done unto me." – put another way, *that which is done to the most vulnerable of the body is done unto the whole body.*

Normally when we speak in Church of the "most vulnerable" we call to mind those in the margins such as the sick, the needy, the prisoner, the widow, the orphan, and the refugee. But in our current public health crisis, the "most vulnerable" amongst us might be reframed as the elderly, those with compromised immune systems, those who have had organ transplants, those who take immunosuppressant drugs (this includes me – to treat my arthritis), and those with pre-existing weakened pulmonary systems.

Because of this current reality, our Bishop has directed all parishes in the Diocese of Atlanta to immediately begin implementing some **temporary** changes to our worship and common life to help us to care for the whole of the body as we gather.

In summary, these **temporary** actions are:

- To discontinue serving the wine of the Eucharist to the Assembly.
- To limit the number of hands that touch the bread of the Eucharist as it is served.
- To discontinue the sending of Eucharistic Visitors to those who cannot attend.
- To drain baptismal fonts so that standing water is not touched.
- To discontinue hand-to-hand contact in exchanging the Peace.
- To cease the practice of “passing” the collection plates at the offertory.

Now that you have read these (or perhaps read them earlier in a direct communication from Bishop Wright that I will attach to the end of my message to you), I am aware that you may be feeling confusion, anger, relief, or a whole other range of emotions. Please allow me to walk you through what the implications of these directives will mean for us at St. Bede’s and how we will implement them.

Firstly, I ask you to remember with me that we believe that Sacrament of the Eucharist is complete in either part. There is nothing “magical” that occurs when the bread and wine come together in your person. Instead, something “mystical” occurs when you are moved to come forward in community to participate in Communion. The classical definition of a “sacrament” is: an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. When you are moved to participate in Holy Communion the “inward grace” of the sacrament has already occurred. The “outward” sign of receiving the elements of the Eucharist serve to name that “inward grace” in a tactile and visible way – an enfleshing.

To this point, we will consecrate bread and wine as the prayers for the Eucharist imagine, but we will only receive the bread – a complete container or “host” for the grace of that sacrament. For the time being, we will also temporarily switch to using wafers instead of baked bread to further limit the number of human hands in contact with the elements. The presiding priest will be the only person administering the bread to the people and the presider will appropriately wash and sanitize their hands immediately before beginning the Eucharistic Prayer. This means that *temporarily*, Eucharistic Ministers and clergy assisting in the liturgy will forgo their regular role of serving communion. We look forward to restoring those roles along with the ministry of our bread bakers as soon as possible.

Secondly, as Bishop Wright modeled at our wonderful celebration last week, please pass the peace in a no-contact or non “hand-to-hand” contact fashion – simple bows, elbow bumps, tapping toes together, making the sign of peace, or be creative! The Peace is important – it discloses that we *are* in communion before we *receive* Communion.

Thirdly, we will *temporarily* stop passing offering plates. Baskets will be placed on the front rows and one offering plate will be placed on a table near the font. You may make your offering as you move about to share the Peace or as you come forward or return

from Communion. You may also make your gifts to St. Bede's electronically through Realm or through the electronic giving kiosk in the Commons.

The final significant change may be the most difficult to understand – that of ceasing sending Eucharistic Visitors. We will still be caring-for and checking-in with all of those who cannot attend Church, we will simply be “pausing” these visits until the wisdom of our public health officials tells us that close contact with those most vulnerable is no longer an acute threat. I will be writing to our Eucharistic Visitors to encourage them to use this time to keep in even closer contact via telephone or mail with the folks whom they regularly visit to let them experience the love of being in-communion with the parish even if we *temporarily* cannot bring communion to them.

Please be assured that none of your parish clergy, nor your Bishop, delight in any of these *temporary* changes. Hopefully you realize from our regular practices and from Bishop Wright's spirit and practices when he was with us last Sunday, that under “normal” conditions, we would want to encourage the maximum involvement of all persons in serving and participating in the full practices of our worship together. My hope is that the conditions that have led to these *temporary* directives pass quickly and we can soon return to our regular practices.

In the meantime, PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE stay home if:

- You are sick
- You think you might be sick
- You are in that “most vulnerable” group that I mentioned earlier – because you are at risk to exposure from contact with other people

There are no special prizes awarded in heaven for “perfect attendance”. If you are absenting yourself temporarily from parish life until this passes, please let us know so that we can remain in touch and keep you in our prayers.

Along with the Bishop's Office, our staff, and our own resident Public Health experts, I am monitoring the news at how developments might further affect our common life. As of the time I am writing to you (Thursday afternoon, March 12), four dioceses of the Episcopal Church (Washington D.C., Lexington, Virginia, and Kentucky) have announced that they are suspending worship for at least two weeks to practice something that you will likely be hearing more about known as “social distancing”. Basically this means keeping healthy people apart for a spell so that illness cannot spread. It is different from “quarantine” where someone who is already ill is held apart to prevent further infection. We are not at that stage yet and may not get there, but if we do, we will communicate further with you in a timely fashion.

Keep the world in your prayers. Pray for the sick, the families of the sick, medical and public health officials, government leaders, all those in positions of public trust. Pray for

Bishops and other religious leaders who will have to make difficult decisions about how the faithful will gather (or possibly not gather) that will often go against their vision and theology of how the Church should look. Pray for those whose jobs may be affected, those who may lose their jobs, for children in schools, for teachers and administrators. Pray for calm and public order. And pray for each other.

All of these changes (and others that may emerge) could have the potential to actually draw us closer together in solidarity and understanding even as they paradoxically may separate us physically. Human love is great in proximity, but let us strive in the weeks ahead to manifest and share that love that God has shared with us in amazing new ways no matter whether we are together or separated. “Love one another as I have loved you.” This is the Great Commandment that Jesus Christ has given us. Be creative in these unusual times as you stay connected in love even as physical contact is limited.

I love you all and I will continue praying as God leads us through this time.

With love and appreciation,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Chad' with a stylized flourish at the end.

Chad+