

Hope: A Pastoral Letter from Bishop Rickel

March 26, 2020

***“To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”
Romans 8:6***

Today is my son’s 24th birthday. He lives in New Orleans, which has become one of the COVID-19 hotspots right now. Several weeks ago, and for months before that, we had planned to leave today to be in New Orleans for his birthday and to spend the weekend with him. Of course, all of that has changed. And that is a reality for all of us. Many, many things have changed and continue to every day. For our planet, and for its inhabitants, this is one of the greatest challenges of our lifetimes. There is great uncertainty about so much.

And in many ways, we feel in exile. Adrift a bit. That is not a comforting feeling. What we know is scary, what we don’t know even scarier. And yet, even in isolated exile, we are not alone. It’s apparent now that our Holy Week and Easter Day will need to be virtual and not face-to-face. Yes, that is a huge loss for us. It will be mightily different. But hear me, please. Nothing can stop Easter. Nothing. It is coming, virus or not, packed churches or empty ones. No matter what, it is coming. That is actually the whole point of Easter in the first place, Jesus risen from the dead, and through that, complete victory over death. This virus, nor nothing else, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In my sermon this past Sunday, as I contemplated Psalm 23, I said these words:

My fellow followers. God is right here, even if we all can’t be. God is right with you, God is with everyone suffering with this, and even with those selfishly ignoring all of this. You and I may not get to share communion right now, but in God, we are in communion. Even separated we are communion... Coming here was and will be again a great blessing, and now we might even say a luxury. We will certainly relish it when we can be here again, but no space, no symbol, no ritual, no manual act done perfectly, or not done at all, no theology or ecclesiology will ever make us be loved one bit more, or less by God. Wherever we are, together, or separate, surrounding this table, or surrounding the world, God is in the midst of us, loving us.

And I believe all of it. As Paul’s Letter to the Romans reminds us this Sunday, we are people of the Spirit, not of the flesh, and yet the flesh is not completely negated by that reality. We still live our very real, “fleshy” lives. We are certainly doing that now. But, as people of the Spirit, we have hope beyond this earthly life of the flesh.

As Mayor Durkin of Seattle reminded me yesterday in a interview she gave, “Hope is not an action.” I thought that line sounded a bit strange, but the more I thought about it, the more it really resonates with me, “Hope is not an action.”

Hopelessness is where we sit on the curb, with our head in our hands, and we give up. We are immobilized, we don’t move. We could just as easily sit on the curb, with our head in our hands, and say we are hopeful, and still not move. Hope is a concept, a feeling, an aspiration, but it is not, in and of itself, an action. As I reflected on this more, I believe from hope comes action. And without that second part, no hope can be realized. It might be hopeful to simply state, “Oh, this virus will pass. It will just sweep right through us and be gone.” That is perhaps hope, or a whole

lot of wishful thinking, but those words are not going to make this virus disappear.

Our call to action right now is a hopeful call. We can flatten the curve. We can spread out the pain and loss, instead of adding to the pain and loss. That is our hope, To realize that hope, we have to act. And the action we need to take right now is so foreign to us, both as Americans and as Christians. For us, action means going, doing, being with others, walking closely, along side. And yet this enemy needs the exact opposite from us. The only antidote we have, the only weapon against this enemy, is separation. Please abide by it. We need each other right now, but our need is to be separated, as much of a sacrifice as that is. Every single contact is a potential for continued spread. Every one. I am urging you to take every one seriously, for with every one we not only put ourselves and those we love, but all others, especially those on the front lines, nurses, doctors, EMTs, allied health professionals, chaplains, more at risk. Our role is simple, stay home, stay apart, say your prayers, and continue, as you can, to give. If you have not lost your income, and you still can, please give, to your church, to those agencies helping on the front lines, to any we can, as much as we can.

I am hopeful. Very hopeful. I believe in the God of Love and through that Love I know all matter of things shall be well, and I also firmly believe that hope alone is not an action, but that out of hope, comes action. Let's be what we profess to be, in all the times we are together, the people of the Spirit, people of hope, people of action, people of care for others, those we know, and those we don't. Because Paul was right, and is right now, "to set our minds on the flesh is death, but to set our minds on the Spirit, is life and peace."

I am so grateful, and truly inspired, by all that you are doing, for the creative ways you are staying connected, and being the Body of Christ, even in separation and isolation. Thank you. I am so blessed to be in this ministry, at this time, with all of you.

Faithfully,
Bishop Rickel

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