



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP OF NIAGARA

Anglican Church of Canada

March 26, 2020

TO THE PEOPLE OF THE DIOCESE OF NIAGARA

Dear Friends,

I want to speak to you from my heart in these extraordinary days.

The first thing I'd like to say is that I am so very grateful for every single one of you. As this present crisis has unfolded, I have been amazed – totally amazed – at the ways in which you have responded in love and care for one another and for our diocese as a whole. Not only have you reached out to each other through every means at your disposal, but you have committed to upholding essential ministry and putting your time and your resources behind those commitments. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am profoundly grateful for all that you do in Jesus' name. It's at times like this I am reminded forcefully that we are a family – the family of God – bound by the love of Christ and bound by our beliefs. We are a family that cares deeply for one another.

And now, let me say this: I am concerned for our family.

We are being stretched in unprecedented ways – in a manner that will change us – both during and after this present crisis. This is likely the hardest set of societal circumstances that many of us have ever had to face. The generations who experienced the exigencies of two World Wars and the Great Depression know something of the cultural mental strain and sacrifice experienced during and after those events, but for many of us, these are new and worrying experiences.

From what I can see now, the effects of this time are being felt deeply already: isolation from family and friends is difficult to bear. So also is the strain of learning to use new technology in a truncated timeline and under pressure in order to stay connected to each other. The effects of being in close quarters with those we love, but are used to having some healthy space that everyday activities of work and voluntarism and friends provide, are also something to mark. The change in our routines - or the lack of routines; the lack of the usual boundaries of work and home, play into a sense of free-flowing time. Work is, of course, necessary so that we can earn our living. It is also necessary for our spiritual and mental health. But to work without ceasing is a threat to those things as well. So, please do everything you can keep your normal work-life boundaries.

I am also concerned about the effects of being turned in on ourselves. Isolation can mean that we are forced to be with ourselves in ways that can be challenging and unfamiliar.

We are also experiencing the temporary loss of sacramental practices and traditions, which is hard, especially when they offer us so much comfort in ordinary times. I share with you in that grief – the celebration of the Eucharist is a profound privilege and expression of the gathered community of Jesus-followers. However, all of this is for the greater good of our whole society as well as the people within our care of souls.

The Right Reverend Susan J. A. Bell

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What can we do about this? How can we respond to these times as Christians?

Well, as we fast from the Eucharist, we can feast on the Word. Read with me the enduring wisdom of 1 Corinthians 13, verses 4-7:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

In the first instance, it is crucial that we use this time to pray: to offer up to God this time, these thoughts, to offer up the anxiety and isolation and place them at the foot of the cross and remember that they will be carried to our loving God by the great intercessor, Jesus. And know that our prayers will be understood. For our God has known these things – Jesus in his humanity, has known the fear of being alone and has experienced the many ‘rabbit holes’ that our minds can take us down in times of isolation.

In his letter to the troubled Corinthian church, St. Paul reminds them of the content of Christian love. He says that love is patient – and that is an attitude of mind and heart. First and foremost, we must be patient with ourselves as we navigate our new patterns. And secondly, we must be patient with each other - this is a core principle in these days of physical distancing. The restrictions on our movement are hard to bear but they are for the good of all – particularly the most vulnerable among us. As Christians who care for the widow and the orphan among us, we are used to giving up our comfort for their good. The fact is, the greatest weapon we have against this virus right now is patience: patience with physical distancing and the disruption of life as usual. But that comes with inevitable sacrifice.

So, be patient with the ones you share this time with: your families, your friends, your colleagues. Everyone is under some kind of pressure and doing the best they can. Patience and loving words are what we need to gift to each other in this time. In addition, this physical distancing may last for some time. Epidemiologists around the globe assure us that this is the best approach to protect community health. So as much as you can, settle into this time and use it for God’s glory.

Love is kind and it is characterized by the kind actions and attitudes St. Paul talks about, so be kind to yourselves and to the ones around you. This is a spiritual discipline and one that we must work at with intentionality. I offer a special thought and prayer for those of you who live on your own: the effect of more time on your own is doubly difficult. We all receive the ministry of presence through touch and voice and to be without those things because we are deprived of our wider church communities is a heavy burden to carry. I pray God’s peace and presence are with you palpably in these times.

My friends, my own instinct is to want to reach out to each and every one of you across our diocese with a handshake of peace (you know me – I’m a people person). But our times, perforce, make that a virtual action only. Nevertheless, be assured that you are in my mind and heart constantly. I pray for you all every day along with our much-loved leaders – that we will all be given the strength to do God’s loving will in these extraordinary times.

These thoughts and concerns I offer to you through the love of Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan Niagara". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the left of the printed name below it.

Bishop of Niagara