



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP OF NIAGARA

ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

January 13, 2021

TO THE PEOPLE OF THE DIOCESE OF NIAGARA

Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

~ Matthew 22:36-40

Dear friends,

Yesterday, we heard from the Premier that Ontario is once again in a state of emergency and this means an even more severe lockdown with a stay-at-home order. This was not the news we were hoping for, but it is the news we have. Churches around the world are making the same decision that we made just prior to Christmas to close their buildings. And they have made it, not because our worship or our community life has ceased, but because we *must* hold our physical presence in abeyance for a season so that we can love our neighbour.

The Archbishop of Canterbury recently shared this message on his social media feeds:

Staying at home is loving your neighbour.
Wearing a mask is loving your neighbour.
Keeping your distance is loving your neighbour.
Washing your hands is loving your neighbour.
Let's keep loving our neighbours.

I don't think any of us imagined that these things would be the content of Jesus' summary of all the law.

But they are. They really are – in our present context.

Of course, loving our neighbours is just part of Jesus' summary. The other part has to do with loving God – with all our hearts and minds and souls. This practice of faithfulness is crucial to our physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.

There are many ways that we can feed our faith in isolation: online parish programs, apps and worship livestreams abound. I have signed up to read the Bible in a year and I say morning prayer with the dean of Canterbury cathedral a few mornings a week as well as continuing with my daily prayers for all of you and my personal discipline of study as prayer.

We may not be able to travel in the conventional sense; we may have to shelter in place; but we *can* travel in the expansiveness of our hearts and minds and souls. And that is a gift of freedom in a time when we are constrained in so many other ways.

For some reason this shutdown feels harder. Perhaps it is because a vaccination program is under way and the end of the pandemic feels nearer. Perhaps it is the disappointment of having to distance from those we have been missing so much over the holiday season. Perhaps we are just tired of making needful sacrifices again and having to dig very deep to meet the exigencies of this very hard time. If you are experiencing part or the aggregate of all these stressors, please know that I am praying for you, and that God is with us to comfort and support us through this wilderness time.

And so that this stress is not felt any more than it has to be, please prayerfully consider renewing your efforts to connect with the lonely, the sick, the elderly, and the isolated. By loving this way, everyone will know that we are Christians.

Finally, may God bless you and give you the strength and the patience to be equal to this moment and love our neighbours as ourselves. Your loving and faithful witness is so very important at this critical moment, and it will get us to the promised land where COVID-19 will be no more.

For now, be well, stay safe, and may the unending, unconditional, and unwavering love of God be with you always.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Susan Niagara". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop of Niagara