We have four students in our Mentoring ministry. They are in their last lag of preparation for their Affirmation of Faith (commonly known as Confirmation) which was supposed to happen on the Day of Pentecost in a couple of Sundays. We will have to reschedule that toward the end of the year. I invite you to pray for their faith discovery journey and for their mentors.

We have six students in our three-year confirmation study plan, and we are doing weekly on-line classes. This year, we are studying Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, and, at the moment, we are completing the units on the Ten Commandments. In the weeks ahead, we will be looking at the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Sacraments, and more. The way Martin Luther organizes his commentary is by introducing a biblical question, “What is it?” replicating the question of the Israelites in the desert when they saw the manna for the first time (Exodus 16:13-16). In a way, Luther is asking, “What’s God doing with this? Why is it important to me? How is this affecting my salvation?”

Looking specifically at each of the Ten Commandments, Luther answers his own question, “What is it?”, by starting with the statement “We are to fear and love God, so that…” The repeated reference to fear and love is meant to stress in the life of a disciple the importance of honoring, glorifying, and sanctifying the name of the Lord in our life as a reflection of our deep love connection with God. In other words, God’s love for us solicits our love and respect for God and our neighbor. Love and respect take visual form in our openness, generosity, and friendliness, all behaviors that manifest the ethics of God’s kingdom.

The highlight of last week’s class came as one of the students came to a “aha” moment in the realization that in the light of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, the apex of God’s love for us, there is absolutely nothing that can separates us from that love, not even the breach of a commandment.

The realization of God’s love for us is so profound that it re-orients our whole life. It strengthens our will with courage and our muscles with confidence. It gives us insight, wisdom, and counsel. We gain a new perspective as we put on Christ and demonstrate focused resolution as we step into the living waters of life in the Spirit. Once God has made a dwelling place in us, it will be immediately evident that loving God and following the commandments are all and the same activity. Jesus has indeed kept his promise that he wouldn’t leave us orphaned: God’s presence is emphatically evident in acts of compassion and generosity, in the choices we make to be present to one another in moments of joy and in the troubled moments of sorrow, and in the transformation of our sincere prayers into life-giving actions.

But there is no denying that there are moments of disorientation and helplessness. There are moments such as the one we are presently moving through when we have little clue as to what direction we might want to be going, experiencing frustrating times of loneliness, melancholy, and perhaps even despair. Yes, we are trying to remain connected using with limited skills the technology available, and it’s nice to see familiar faces at least on a screen. But it’s not the same, is it? It’s not the same to smile at others over the screen; it’s not the same arguing a difficult point when the internet is frustratingly unstable. We ache to get together and yet we realize that the best way to show love at this time is to stay at least six feet apart.

Jesus’ promise that he will not leave us orphaned, desolate, abandoned takes on a new meaning and a new urgency. I trust his consoling words. I hang on tight to his words knowing that I will have to look for his presence differently, with creativity and perseverance. Jesus is on his way. Coming to us, to all of us, even now. Even though from our perspective, we cannot always see him. He is on his way and he will most certainly show up in ways that are different from what we are accustomed to. It reminds me of the prophet’s words spoken on behalf of God: “I’m about to do a new thing. Do you not see it?” (Isaiah 43:19). Our senses need to be sharpened, and our imagination needs to be revived. Our prayer life needs to be pregnant with requests to see the Resurrected One with new eyes. We are called anew to trust and follow him no matter the confusion, no matter the frustration and the aching. Faith means to remain faithful especially when things are not clear to us. We move in the dark, doing our best to interpret what God would want us to do.

We follow his voice in the dark knowing that yes, we want to be faithful and long for peace in our hearts and among people but our responses to our challenges are often limited, sometimes fragmented by our lack of knowledge, sometimes shadowed by our own fears, and sometimes smeared with our selfishness, arrogance, and stubbornness. The apostle Peter tells us to rejoice when people react negatively to our acts of love. Perhaps, that may be the case sometimes and so we know we are on the right track. But some other time, we realize that my well-intended actions are still limited by our short sightedness, by our ignorance of all the facts, and often by our unskillfulness. Yet, self-criticism and self-obsession cannot become the booby trap we fall into. Trust in his words, even and especially during what feels like a time of failure and isolation, gives us the sufficient encouragement we need to go on: “you can do it; it’s going to be ok.”

The Easter message is that life rather than death has the final word, and this is crucial for faith. And faith is a relationship with a living being. For there to be authentic faith in Jesus, people must be able to relate to the living Jesus, who is not absent but present. Otherwise faith is reduced to the memory of a Jesus who died long ago. And what helps the world see Jesus living and present are we, the Church. But not the Church striving on our own vision and mission; the Church imbued with the Spirit of Jesus. The Church will fumble the ball constantly but with the aid of the Advocate will find new directions and mission. It’ll be through the good counsel of the Spirit that the Church will have a message to relay, for it is the Spirit that makes the presence of the Father and the Son known to the world. It’s God’s mission and we jump on board; we participate in that mission.

It is a privilege to be called to be part of that mission. Our heart expands as we are given the opportunity to give back to God in gratitude. The many volunteers who are part of the weekly video production are filled with hope. Those who donate for our ministry to continue see their joys multiplied. Those whose hands itch to reopen the food pantry see their compassion enlarge. There is an abundance of life for those who hunger for a relationship with God. Maybe some are approaching God anonymously through our online worship services. Maybe some others are checking us out to see if our relationship with God is for real. Many are hungry for hope. Many search for peace. Many want to know if they can trust the inner movement of the Spirit and come out of their self-imposed isolation from God: if they make the leap of faith and change, there will be a real God sustaining them, a real Church embracing them?

Write to your friends, let them know that you are thinking of them. Call your daughter, your son; let them know you forgive them. Call those who are isolated and feel lonely; tell them God loves them. Pass the word to those who need encouragement, our worship services are on the radio every Sunday night (FM 102.9 at 6:00 PM) and we pray for the needs of the world every Thursday morning (10:30 AM, call 929-205-6099).

May we all experience the love of God anew. May there be peace in our hearts. May there be peace in all the world. Amen.