Holy Communion and the Pandemic
You will probably have noticed that our live-streamed Sunday morning services have not included Holy Communion. You might have also wondered if there might be a way to continue having Communion with our live-streamed services. I’ve wondered that too. It has seemed to me that it would not be inconsistent with our Lutheran understanding of the nature of this sacrament to have each person or family unit attending remotely to provide their own bread and wine, and then for the presider to pray the Eucharistic prayer, for everyone to commune, and for this to be considered a valid way of administering the sacrament. But in conversation with Bishop Roth, whom I respect and trust as theologian and biblical scholar as well as a pastor and bishop, I was led to recognize that there is more to consider here. Most importantly, in my mind, is the nature of our assembly when we “gather” through electronic media. One important characteristic of Holy Communion is that it is done in community. And because our current situation is so new, it is not entirely clear what the nature of our virtual assemblies really is. The question for me has become not “would this be valid?” (I think I could make a good argument that it would be), but “is it necessary?” (not strictly, in my view) and “is it advisable?” – i.e., will it do more harm than good in the long run? That remains an open question for me. What harm could it do? I’m not entirely clear on that, but it has been suggested that it might tend to weaken our appreciation and trust in the real presence of Christ in this sacrament and promote a more symbolic and casual understanding – reinforcing the notion that Holy Communion isn’t that big a deal. The argument is that such a practice could, therefore, for some people at least, undermine the gospel, the promise of God’s real and transformative presence in us through this sacred meal. As I said, I am not entirely persuaded by this objection, but at the same time I take it seriously. So I find myself conflicted about the idea of “remote” Communion like that suggested above.

The bottom line for me, however, is that our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops and ELCA teaching theologians, has recommended that we refrain from Holy Communion while we are not able to physically gather. I take seriously that we are in this together as the church, and that we should not presume unilaterally to change our practices at this time. If you are interested in learning more, you could start with the Presiding Bishop’s statement found here. That will lead you to some other resources as well. And feel free to contact me about this. I welcome your thoughts.

+ Pastor Repp