

March 22, 2020 - Farewell Message by Pastor Christian Ceconi

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you!

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven (Ecclesiastes 3:1), that's what we read in Ecclesiastes. We all had ideas and plans what this Sunday was going to look like. We anticipated a church filled with many people, we envisioned a procession with our bishop, wonderful music and song from our church choir, and of course meeting and greeting many, many people after the service. Now this church is empty and only a few people are here to record this video message.

A lot has happened since we announced that the farewell service will be cancelled. It was a week full of church life despite the closed and empty building. Dozens of phone calls have been made, mail packages were sent out with devotionals and instructions and ideas how to stay in touch. I got the feeling that we have talked to each other more than ever. Deep and meaningful conversations took place. People prayed for each other and asked for help or provided support. It was quieter somehow, there was uncertainty what is going to happen in the next couple of weeks. There was a lot of learning how to stay safe and how to keep each other safe by washing our hands regularly and keeping a safe distance. So, there was both, concern *and* the blessing of a time where we are close to each other despite the social distancing.

It's is fascinating that this week's gospel from John 9 is about blindness and the ability to see. Because that's what we struggle with right now, with a virus we can't see yet one which spreads and is endangering people. We struggle with not being able to see each other since we need to keep a safe distance in order to prevent the virus from spreading.

In this gospel there is the promise of healing. The blind is healed by Jesus and he can see. When he returns to his community everybody is having a hard time with this new situation. They can hardly believe that this healing happened. They question if it's the same man who's been blind before. They question if this is real, although he assures them and says: Yes, it's me.

Jesus says at the end: "I have come into this world so that those who do not see may see..."

I think that's what we need in these days. We need to see each other even though we can't see each other.

We need to see each other's needs.

We need to see each other's need to be safe and protected.

We need to see each other's need for encouragement and prayer and a phone call.

Social distancing doesn't mean that we are isolated. Not seeing each other doesn't mean that we can't take care of each other. Not celebrating Sunday worship in the way we usually do doesn't mean that we are not in communion in and through Christ.

[showing the ICNU sign]

Some of you know this sign. It reads I-C-N-U.

I showed you this sign before during one of my sermons. It means that we are called to tell each other which gifts and blessings we see in each other. We are called to tell each other "I see in you...", because sometimes we can't see it ourselves. And therefore, we sometimes do not recognize and acknowledge the many gifts we have. Practising ICNU means to discover the abundance of God's gifts and to discover how and in which ways we can serve in God's kingdom.

What I really love in this community, in this Martin Luther Church, is, that the ICNU thing has become a habit. Sometimes it's just a matter of perspective if something is seen as a problem or as an opportunity.

Believing that God in his abundant love can transform everyone and everything, this congregation always leans toward the opportunity, trying to discover where God sees the opportunity and where God wants us to take the opportunity for his kingdom's sake.

That's what I really enjoyed and still enjoy here at Martin Luther Church. That's why I think this congregation is such a blessing beyond its church walls. That's why I am confident that this Corona Crisis will be a challenge for all of us, but also an opportunity to do God's work.

It is sad that I can't worship with you in this sanctuary right now. I would love to shake your hands and to hug you and to tell you what a difference this congregation and the years in ministry with you have made in my life and in the life of our family. I would love to express my gratitude and I would love to say in person a heartfelt thanks to you.

God willing there will be a time for us to meet and to celebrate.

For now, I encourage you to see the opportunities and the blessings God provides, to stay connected in prayer and mutual support.

I am grateful that our Vicars Silke and Adam and Jordan together with our church council we lead you in these challenging times. You all are a wonderful and generous community embodying God's love for the world.

The Lord bless you and keep you, The Lord's face shine on you with grace and mercy.
The Lord look upon you with favor and + give you peace.

John 9:1-41

A Man Born Blind Receives Sight

9 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We[Ⓜ] must work the works of him who sent me[Ⓜ] while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

The Pharisees Investigate the Healing

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus[Ⓜ] to be the Messiah[Ⓜ] would be put out of the synagogue. ²³Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are

disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

Spiritual Blindness

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. ³⁹Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.