

So, I want you to do something this morning, and I know that silence when we're online is a little bit of an awkward thing...trust me after a week of virtual Kairos and sitting in silence sometimes in small group while youth thought about the questions we were asking, I know it can make you feel a little shifty in your seat and want to just leap into it and stop it, but as I said a few weeks ago, we can do hard things, including sitting in silence online when we need to. Here's what I want you to do...I want you to grab a piece of paper and something to write with, or if you have your phone pull up your notes app or whatever you might use to write something down on your phone, and I'm going to give you a few minutes, like legit a couple of minutes of silence because I'm going to do it too, to write down whatever it is that is weighing on you, it could be right this very second, it could be things from this past week, it could just be things in general about life or the world, it could be baggage from the past that still makes its weight known.

I know that these aren't exactly the most fun things to wade in to. Usually, we like to keep that stuff packaged up tight in little compartmentalized boxes in our brains, not to be taken out and dealt with most of the time. Which is also why I'm giving you a few minutes for this, because you might need a hot second to center yourself to be able to honestly and openly face those things and actually be able to put them into

words. But seriously, a few minutes, to yourself, if you're gathered with your family maybe even send each other to separate corners of the room to give yourselves space. Take a couple of deep breaths, feel God surround you in this moment of honesty, and let it out...

Ok...let's make our way back together...here we sit, all of us, each and every one of us with a list of our own. It could be long, scribbled in haste to make sure that you got everything down, it could be short, maybe just one thing, written in big, bold letters. Maybe your writing is smaller than it usually is because sometimes the weights of our heart are harder to write out legibly, like if we write them small enough they might become a little less real, or like we've acknowledged them but only a smidge. Maybe you ran out of time and your brain is still kicking out ideas of what you want, what you need to write. Maybe it looks a little bit like your to do list, a list of everyday stressors that weigh you down. Maybe it looks like a history book, a page of your autobiography, events, moments, thoughts from years, decades ago that still tug at your heart and refuse to let go. For each of us these lists will look different...but maybe, some of us share the same things...

Maybe for you one of the first things written down, possibly in big, bold letters is COVID. This interminable, frustrating, uncertain, scary *thing*

that just pervades every moment of our daily lives, begging for attention, sucking the bandwidth out of every moment of our lives because there's no ignoring it, it's just there. And under that one big heading of this dang virus could be your struggles with quarantine, deep seated feelings of isolation and longing, longing for the comforting arms of family and friends, longing to no longer see the people you love most over computer and phone screens, longing to just no longer be within the same four walls constantly. Feelings of annoyance and guilt that there are days when maybe you're just a little tired of being surrounded by your family no matter how much you love them. Feelings of loss, loss of loved ones and friends taken by this disease, loss of loved ones or friends who have passed away in other ways but have not been able to be properly mourned and grieved, loss of normalcy, where you just want to go sit in a restaurant and not have it be a big, huge, stressful worry, loss of joy, for vacations and camps and Busch Gardens and church and youth events, loss of certainty, loss of faith in humanity as we continue to struggle to agree on how to properly face this thing and treat each others lives with care. Feelings of frustration, at others refusal to wear a mask, at the very idea of having to wear a mask. Feelings of powerlessness, because everything just feels hard and like it is just never, ever going to end. COVID

and its entire nasty mess of a thing could fill countless lists...and yet it's just one thing out of so many.

Beyond COVID, for each of us, this list becomes deeply and intensely personal. Maybe it's struggles with mental health, feelings of anxiety or depression that you just can't seem to get a grip on, or even when you have a grip on them feel like they make you less than or damaged or messy. Maybe it's struggles with stress, from work, from family, from life in general, with not knowing which way to turn. Maybe it's struggles with the world we're living in, political division and less than polite discourse, racism, protestors being taken off the street, police brutality, the wide brush that is painting *all* police officers rather than taking things on a case by case basis, the constant battle between who is right and who is wrong, what is fact and what is opinion, decisions made by the few that impact the many, feeling like you are a lone voice crying out in a wilderness with no one listening, wondering if you're the only one that cares. Maybe it's just flat out annoyance that you hate feeling hanging on your heart. Annoyance at social media, at the news, at people who disagree with you, that just general feeling of *meh* that seems to be right at the tip of all our fingers lately as this time drags on. Maybe it's a continuing battle with addiction which is never truly won but is a daily battle to keep fighting and to allow yourself to remember that you are more

than that one thing, that it doesn't get to define who you are, even when on your worst days it feels like it does. Maybe it's struggles with identity or next steps or just wondering where life is going to take you, wondering what comes next or how you're going to face the next thing or whether who you feel you are deep down is someone that the world will find worthy of love, even if you know that the world's opinion doesn't matter but you can't stop yourself from worrying about it.

Maybe your list is simply a list of questions that are tugging at your heart, am I good enough, is it ok to doubt, is it ok to struggle, where am I going, what am I supposed to do, how do I fix this, what if schools don't open, am I being a good enough parent, partner, kid, support system through quarantine, am I loveable, will I ever be accepted, will I ever be forgiven, will I ever forgive, will I ever let it go, is it always going to be like this, what if my life is never normal again, what if no one ever sees me for who I am, am I living my truth, what if I can't do this, what if my church doesn't accept me, what if God doesn't accept me, what if God doesn't love me...what if all of these things I've written down are really just a laundry list of all the reasons why God could never possibly love me?

But here's the thing...look at your list...there is nothing, absolutely, categorically nothing on that list, it doesn't matter how long or short it is,

whether it's filled with big things or little things, that can make God not love you. I know to us, our lists feel huge and hard and like they are full of all sorts of reasons why we're a mess or unworthy or unacceptable or not our best selves, but here's the thing...God doesn't care if you're a mess, God loves your mess. You are always worthy and acceptable in God's eyes, because God made you who you are, beautifully and perfectly imperfect. God loves you even when you aren't your best self, because even your not so best self belongs to God and is seen and cherished by God.

The Bible study folks know this, but I'm a very bad Lutheran sometimes in that I have a not so great relationship with Paul, but let me tell you, sometimes Paul just go it so categorically right and today is one of those days. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing in all of creation can separate us from God's love. Nothing on any of our lists can separate us from God's love. For I am convinced that neither messiness, nor brokenness, nor uncertainty, nor viruses, nor Facebook, nor addiction, nor frustration, nor worry, nor school calendars, nor anything else in this crazy, wild world of ours can separate us from God's love.

It's up to you what you do with your list, tear it up, burn it in your fire pit, throw it out, keep it, do whatever you need to do with it to keep one solid assurance in your heart, you are loved. God loves you. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing can stop that. Nothing has ever stopped it before and nothing will ever stop it in the future. God loves you. God loves you exactly as you are. God loves you no matter what your list looks like and no matter what is on that list. God loves you. I'll say it one more time because it bears perpetual repeating...God loves you...for today, for this moment, set your list aside and let that one fact be enough.

AMEN!!!