

March 2025



### From the Bishop:

Dr. Anna Lembke, a psychiatrist and an expert in addiction, states: “Rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide are going up in countries all over the world, and they're going up fastest in the richest nations of the world. ... We are now turning to [electronic] devices and to the Internet to meet our physical, emotional, sexual, educational, every need we have. We don't really need other people anymore. We can get those needs met from the internet. I think that's a very scary prospect because I think it means that we will become more and more isolated.” (“Digital Drugs Have Us Hooked. Dr. Anna Lembke Sees a Way Out,” *The Daily by The New York Times* podcast, 2/1/2025)

What Dr. Lembke is talking about is the dopamine hit that people receive while on their phones and other devices. More and more research is coming out that dopamine, the neurotransmitter that motivates us to do things we think will bring pleasure, is being activated by electronic media in the same way that junk food activates over-eating.

So why am I (a theologian, pastor, and bishop - but not a scientist) talking about this? Well, I think that the moving from human interaction to electronic interaction is of theological and pastoral concern. You see, at the same time that more and more research is telling us about the harm that is happening when we get “hits” of dopamine from electronic media, we are also hearing (and experiencing in our own lives and social networks) that loneliness and anxiety and stress are rising. In isolation, we might lose trust in others and in our institutions, experience a crumbling of empathy, be susceptible to disinformation, and build walls instead of bridges to another.

Now, before you say to me, “Do you know what is happening in this world?” Please hear me – I know. I know. There is a lot going on in our families, with people we care about, in the United States, and in the world as a whole. I, too, am feeling despair and disbelief. There are valid reasons for feeling anxiety and stress. And we might feel isolated and scared because of these circumstances.

But I implore you, please don't try to navigate all of the things you are experiencing alone – without anyone around you. Please don't always turn to your phone and doomscroll or neglect relationships or separate yourself. Instead, I encourage you to look for those spaces where you can physically connect with another person or people. Please find those places where you can authentically, truly be yourself – in your joy, in your sorrow, in your anxiety, and more.

I pray that one of these places is your church community. That you can pray and sing and learn and grow, that you can receive and grant forgiveness through Jesus, receive the sacraments, take action through the Spirit, give and receive care, and that you can rest when needed. I pray that you may do this all in a sacred space where you deeply connect with others – even if you don't always agree with one another. I pray that you can have meaningful relationships, conversation, and can be there for one another. I pray that you receive love just as you love others. I pray that if you are feeling lonely or despairing, there are those you can reach out to who will sit with you and bring God's promises again to you.

In these days, when it feels like there is so much, may you feel God's love and grace surrounding you in the community of others. May we trust in Jesus' promise, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

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## From the VEEP:

“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:16

“There's a little light in all of us by God's design  
But you can't be a beacon if your light don't shine.” - Marty Cooper

My congregation recently decided to do a little spiffing up of our sanctuary. While the painters were up on a ladder putting a new coat on the wall behind the altar, they bumped into the brown, wooden cross that is firmly affixed there. As they did, a shower of soot and dirt fell to the floor. On closer inspection, it turns out the cross is NOT entirely made of wood. In fact, a large portion is apparently made of brass. This came as a surprise to even the longest tenured members of the congregation. No one remembered it ever being anything but a matte brown. Our cross was created to shine, but over the decades, the soot from the candles on the altar below slowly accumulated, covering its true nature, dimming its brightness.

We, also, were created to shine. In her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston describes our creation like this: “When God had made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over.” In her version, the angels got jealous and covered us all in mud, making us “tumbling mud-balls,” straining to show our shine. I don’t know about jealous angels, but I do know It is easy to have our light dimmed slowly, layer by layer as the daily hardships of life begin to weigh us down. A rude word spoken here, a dismissive comment there, a missed deadline, a lost opportunity - even such seemingly minor things can add a layer of soot obscuring our sparkle. Add to that the truly traumatic and tragic happenings in our lives - natural disasters, wars, gun violence, political upheaval, loss of loved ones - and eventually our true natures, the spark given each of us by our creator God, can be so deeply covered we forget it was ever there.

How do we rediscover that God-given spark? How can we once again let our light shine? It can take some elbow grease, that’s for sure. Recovering our true selves can take time and effort. Sometimes, it feels safer to stay hidden. Bright lights make good targets, after all. If, however, we want to start brushing that dust and soot away, we might start by refocusing our attention away from what the world says to and about us to what God wants us to be. We are made in God’s own image. We are God’s face to the world, carrying on Jesus’ mission of reconciliation, healing, and love. We are called to welcome the stranger, love our neighbors and to do justice and seek mercy. When we focus on *whose* we are, we are better able to remember *who* we are. God created us to sparkle and calls us to be light for the world; we should strive to live up to that calling.

My congregation has since had the brass on our cross scrubbed clean, but we haven’t had it polished. The difference, even so, is amazing. We hope to get someone up there to buff it up and bring back the gleam, but for now we rejoice that we have restored some of the sparkle to our sanctuary. As we go about the work of dusting ourselves off, we should also pause every now and then to reflect on our progress. We can also seek help from others with the hard work of digging into the crevices and polishing up what has been revealed. The ELCA and the NWWA Synod have a network of coaches that can help if you need a hand. ([www.lutheransnw.org/programs/coach-northwest](http://www.lutheransnw.org/programs/coach-northwest); [www.elcacoaching.org/](http://www.elcacoaching.org/)). Blessings on you all as you find new ways to let your light shine!

Here is what I and/or the council have been up to in February:

- DEIB Work: I met with the team coordinating this effort for the synod three times in February. We are looking forward to working with Organizing for Mission on this work.
- Embracing Difference Retreat: I attended this LiVE sponsored retreat on February 8th.
- Executive Committee met on February 13.
- Led Adult Education Hour at Saint Andrews, Bellevue on February 17
- Living Hope Lutheran Celebration: I attended the (re)installation of Pr. Heidi Calhoun at the newly merged Living Hope Lutheran Church (my home congregation).