

Voices: Worshipping from a distance, preparing to be together

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As we walk down this completely unknown road of pandemic—with a new vocabulary, new social habits and new rhythms of daily life—there is enough fear to go around. There is fear of a disease with no analogue or precedent, and in such times, all things become occasion for fear.

To be sure, we are right to fear this virus and what it does to a human body in a short time, to what it does to both young and old. But what we cannot do is be afraid of one another.

On the national level, the combination of misinformation, incompetence and denialism coming out of multiple corners of our culture will work its magic, and America will reap the rewards of decades of anti-institutionalism and snake oil.

America has gotten what it wanted—to be left alone—and will get it until it is sick of having what it wants.

The story of America and the coronavirus will be less like Taiwan and more like Europe. One of the tactics available to us to mitigate the spread of the virus is social distancing—the simple act of being aware of one's own physical space and keeping one's distance.

How we're tempted to see each other

Whether you are in a grocery store or walking on the street, simply being aware of one's own body feels revolutionary. Rather than keeping our noses

in digital spaces, we now are jarred into paying attention to one another. But here's the trick: we experience one another during a pandemic not as a welcome visitor, but as a threat.

Every stranger is no longer a mystery to be encountered or a friend we have not met yet, but a possible carrier. When the virus has no physical attributes, a sneeze could be allergies or the first signs of infection.

In many ways, the move to isolation, while keeping us safer from infection, plays on the worst urges of modern life—the drive to be alone. Meals, movies, education—all of these vestiges of socialization now are done alone out of necessity rather than desire. Having been forced to see one another, we only see one another as a possible threat.

The challenge of isolation for the church

Out of necessity, and out of care for the most vulnerable, this act of keeping space has meant churches are following suit. I agree churches need to be shuttered for now. It is unconscionable to think of holding services either in a way that would endanger the elderly or would exclude them for their own safety. So, until the vulnerable can worship with us, we cannot worship in the same space.

But we must soberly recognize the cost—increased isolation and fragmentation. In our isolation, then, churches must think carefully and quickly about how to connect and, more importantly, *why* we connect.

The gift of isolation to the church

The gift of being absent from one another for now is we have to ask the question of why we do church physically at all. Prior to this, church

broadcasts, livestreams and virtual congregations were less frequent. After this ends, though, churches will have to answer why being present to one another is better than virtual presence.

The answer is this: In gathering with one another, we are taught the Christian life is not about an either/or of spirits versus bodies, or of the visible versus the invisible. In Christ, God has come to us in the flesh; in the Spirit, we are gathered into one visible body; in our worship, we partake of Christ in our presence.

To gather digitally is to be embraced, not as a solution, but as an occasion to remember why we gathered in the first place. God is about taking up the physical world and remaking it.

Reframing worship from a distance

In looking forward to our future gathering, let us learn now to see the physical presence of another not as a threat, but as gifts. Let us see our distance as what we look forward to being overcome. Let us worship distantly, not as a replacement for worship together, but as a sign of the isolation and distance God enjoys breaking down.

During this time, let us live this out by attending carefully to the ones we live with. In the weeks ahead, patience will wear thin and days will grow long. When we encounter another person in the store hunting for scarce groceries and toiletries, let us remember they too are scared and looking after their loved ones; let us have grace with them. When we remember those far from us, take the chance to call and put our voices before one another.

In doing these things, we are learning how to be present with one another well, so when we can be physically present, mingling and bumping into one another, we might finally see one another.

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