

What has the Quarantine Taught Us About Worship?

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Take you back to Sunday, March 8, 2020 – scaling back passing the peace (making jokes about bowing and foot-tapping and considering changes in the way we celebrated communion – something I had been doing with the congregations I served every Sunday for seven years.

Delaware marked its first confirmed COVID-19 infection at UD on Wednesday. By Friday, our Governor announced radical changes in public meetings and interactions to prevent the spread of this virus. We first announced that we would not be celebrating communion that following Sunday, and then we announced we would only be meeting online – after scrambling to find a way to do so with technology that worship leaders and participants could understand.

Before Sunday, March 15, 2020, meeting together may have been our chief non-negotiable of worship. What have we learned about worship since we were forced to quarantine and worship separately or masked and physically distanced for more than a year?

1. **We found another avenue to enable us to gather without harming one another – revealing a more fundamental worship essential (first, do no harm). Wesley Rules: (1) do no harm; (2) do good, and (3) stay in love with God.**
 - a. **We might do well to consider other ways our worship could potentially harm people** (Visitor recognition/exposure, refusing to share “my” seat, Mother’s Day observances, stories from the pulpit, songs, or skits that expose, ignore, or denigrate people/groups)
 - i. 1 Corinthians 14 – Paul’s extended discussion of the need in all things for our worship expressions to build up the whole body of Christ, including especially outsiders or unbelievers (NRSV translation) who cannot understand tongues but can understand a word of prophecy.
 - b. Jesus reserved his harshest and most direct warnings for leaders who burdened and harmed the communities of faith they were supposed to serve:
 - i. “You load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them.” (Luke 11:46 – and Ezekiel 34 prophesy vs. the shepherds)
 - ii. “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18:6)
2. **Faced with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle (certainly one no one could have imagined) we worked creatively, courageously, and tenaciously to find other ways to gather to praise God, and to meet for prayer, Bible study, in small groups, and for administrative purposes, leveraging new and difficult technologies and making room for people who could not use them.**
 - a. We did this virtually overnight – certainly within a week or two – and over the course of Easter and Christmas. **We may need to revise our negative assumptions (and fears) about the ability of the Body of Christ to change rapidly and effectively to meet the needs of a rapidly changing ministry context: the world in which Christ calls and commissions us to be salt and light.**
 - b. New wineskins – Peter’s vision in Acts 10 (Acts 15 letter: “no further burden than these essentials”) – and Paul’s contextual evangelism: “I have made myself a slave to all, so

that I might win more of them... I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:19 and 22b).

3. Through Zoom interactions and Chat features on YouTube and Facebook, many people in our congregations took an active part in worship as never before, greeting and encouraging one another and responding verbally to worship elements, including the sermon.
 - a. **We have an opportunity to explore other ways in which we might invite members of the congregation to participate and to contribute to worship** through technology and a new openness to the gifts that everyone brings to worship when we gather.
 - b. "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up" (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Summary: We are reawakening to recognition of **our true non-negotiables** and **how they might guide us through this time of revolutionary change** (what Phyllis Tickle has called a once-every-500-year rummage sale – when (nearly) everything (we mistakenly put our trust in) must go! "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." Matthew 13:52

These three lessons:

1. Live out our worship as first and always an experience of healing and new life in Christ – whenever and however we gather in the name of Jesus.
2. Recognize God's calling and gifting the church to gird up our loins and respond creatively and without delay to the changing ministry needs wherever God scatters us as heralds of the Kingdom.
3. Make way for the whole people of God to share their gifts and witness in all expressions of the Body of Christ – in worship, discipleship, fellowship, and mission. No spectators – everyone has a part to play.