

ENCOURAGEMENT ON WORSHIP COMING OUT OF A PANDEMIC

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WISDOM FORGED BY EXPERIENCE

In Marilynne Robinson's 2004 novel, *Gilead*, the aged Reverend John Ames reminisces on church life in rural Iowa during the Spanish Influenza:

People came to church wearing masks, if they came at all. They'd sit as far from each other as they could. There was talk that the Germans had caused it with some sort of secret weapon, and I think people wanted to believe that, because it saved them from reflecting on what other meaning it might have... You never would have imagined that almost empty sanctuary, just a few women there with heavy veils on to try to hide the masks they were wearing, and two or three men. I preached with a scarf around my mouth for more than a year. Everyone smelled like onions, because word went around that flu germs were killed by onions.

Solomon's aphorism holds: there is nothing new under the sun. I think it's helpful for us to remember that Christians who have gone before us have endured circumstances similar to our own.¹ We belong to the same Christian Church that produced Cyprian's *De Mortalitate* and Martin Luther's *Whether One May Flee a Deadly Plague*. While this does not diminish the difficulty of what we have experienced, we ought to be filled with courage and hope, for Jesus's promise to his Church has endured through every plague and still stands today. The gates of Hades will not prevail!

We have always known this, but until 2020 we lacked living memory of plague or pandemic and its effect upon church life, à la Reverend Ames. Now we have the experience, but how it settles into our memory and influences our future isn't fleshed out quite yet. The hope for this presentation and the two that follow is to engage together in theological reflection in pursuit of wisdom. What have we learned from our experience, and how will it inform our work in Christ's kingdom as we continue to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments in these last days?

Allow me a disclaimer before diving in. I will offer here my own theological reflections and some opinions that flow from them, but I do not wish my remarks to be construed as condemning anyone for what they are doing. Your context differs from mine and your own theological reflections may have led you in different directions. That's fine. We cherish Christian freedom. But please hear me out. Let's work together from the basis of Christian charity with an eye towards sharpening one another as we seek to reflect on what is not only permissible, but beneficial as it pertains to our worship.²

¹ In October 1918, the state of Wisconsin closed churches and schools. At Grace Lutheran, Milwaukee, services still hadn't resumed by Christmas. See Seth Krueger's 2021 WLS thesis, "Digging Up the Past: How Christian Responses to the 1918 Influenza Epidemic Influence the Church's Approach to Modern Pandemics."

² Citations aren't always encouraging. I'm going to keep citations to a minimum and offer more of a theological reflection and less of an academic paper. So let me state up front that none of these thoughts are original and any noteworthy turn of phrase is more than likely not my own. And so here I wish to acknowledge a few sources that I am reflecting upon and that I would commend to you for your own reading. Of course, our foundation is always the Scriptures, and in this instance I have an eye on 2 Timothy 4:1-5 and Philippians 4:4-9. After that, the Lutheran Confessions—and especially Article V of the Augsburg Confession. Tattoo that on your eyelids so it's always in view. Hermann Sasse brings depth of historical context in his *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, especially Volume 1 and the tremendous essay, *Word and Sacrament, Preaching and Lord's Supper* in Volume 2. *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body*, by Australian Lutheran John Kleinig, is a must-read in our discarnate age. Harold Senkbeil has written a gem on the basics of pastoring, especially in relation to the Divine Service, in *The Care of Souls*. Moving outside of Lutheranism, Eugene Peterson, who is always worth a look, strikes me as especially prescient in his 1987 book, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. And to see growing Evangelical/Reformed movement towards what we have always known and treasured, see Jay Y. Kim in *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age*.

FIRST ENCOURAGEMENT: PERSEVERE IN THE COMMONPLACE

Our language is so shot through with economic metaphors that it is difficult for us to conceive of the church outside of the mental framework of the marketplace. All the principals here know that the first thing someone will ask about their school is, “What’s the enrollment?” followed by, “And is it growing?” The same holds for pastoral thinking about worship. It’s quite easy to start thinking about worship along the lines of, “Am I doing the right things to keep people satisfied? What do I need to do to attract more folks?”

With these thoughts humming in the background, COVID brought about a double whammy of discouragement for churches. First, there were (are) the empty pews. Worship attendance statistics for 2020 looked startlingly different than 2019. I’m sure every one of us can think of someone or perhaps many someones who took a long time to return or who have not yet returned. People just stopped coming to church. That’s discouraging.

Then there were the unintended side-effects of going online. Later we will weigh the merits and drawbacks of online services more comprehensively, but for now I’d like to single out just one point. Going online made it way too easy to shop around for a preacher. And that’s dangerous.

We’re not supposed to be able to choose our own preacher; it undermines the divine call. The Lord is the one who arranges the circumstances so that his man is in the pulpit to preach to the people whom he has gathered in each local congregation. Contrast that with a consumerist attitude that shops around to find the best preacher: “I like this guy, I can really relate to him. He makes me feel good.” Online services made that too tantalizingly easy.

Nor is sinful flesh with itching ears trustworthy in making good decisions as it pertains to the hearing of the Word. We’re kidding ourselves if we think our people are only watching WELS preachers online. And even if they do restrict their online viewing to those in our fellowship, it’s too easy to start making comparisons, “I wish my pastor preached more like ____.”

The same problem, by the way, afflicts pastors. A pastor sitting at home in front of his laptop decides to see what some of the brothers are up to online. He hopes to get a few ideas to help him. What he gets, instead, is a mounting sense of inadequacy. That pastor’s video has more views on YouTube than mine does. His production quality is far more professional. If I want to be more engaging, I should try to be like that guy. The preacher closes the screen and walks away feeling he’s a failure.

Brother pastors, a word for you. You have an advantage that no online preacher can touch. In fact, you are a better preacher than the rockstar guy at your local Megachurch, Inc., who draws such big crowds that the police have to direct traffic on Sunday mornings. Your advantage? You are a pastor-preacher. You know your flock. You visit the sheep, tend to their wounds, soothe their distress, warn and admonish and teach. You love your people. And the warmth of that two-way relationship between you and your people provides a context for preaching that cannot be replicated by a man known only via video feed.

Not only are you a pastor-preacher, you’re a Lutheran pastor-preacher. There’s a theological gulf between our view of preaching and the default understanding of the sermon in America. Lutherans recognize that preaching is sacramental, that is, it actually delivers Christ, and the Spirit actually does his work through the words spoken from the pulpit. Jesus put it quite directly, “The one who hears you hears me” (Luke 10:16). But this perspective is not shared by those who lack our robust theology of the means of grace. An Evangelical can only talk *about* Jesus, hoping to create the right circumstances in which individuals might have an immediate encounter with the Lord. But we speak *for* Christ, and we do so with the confidence that the Holy Spirit will use our preaching to work faith when and where he pleases.

Another way of putting it: preaching is not merely imparting information. If I want to find instructions for how to fix my son’s bicycle, YouTube will do an adequate job. But preaching aims so much deeper, to the heart of my existence. The Lord aims to address me in my *being*, not merely in my *doing*, and he does so by

putting a man in the pulpit to make his living Word reverberate through the air in sound waves that carry a power so vibrant and active it's like hammer and fire. He will reach my heart through my ears. That's a powerful theological conviction, and it's one we shouldn't take for granted.

At this point, I should broaden out beyond preaching to notice the same beautiful dynamic between sheep and shepherd that's at play in the rest of the divine service. For example, Professor Deutschlander was fond of talking about how the absolution could fail to be appropriated. There's a man sitting out there, he'd say, who would hear the pastor say, "I forgive you all your sins," but inwardly that guy's thinking, "If you knew what I've done, pastor, you wouldn't be saying that to me."

In our age of anonymity and disconnectedness, what do we need more than to have pastors who know the people they are serving? Imagine how different the scenario is when the pastor *does* know what the man's done, and still he says, "As a called servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you..." That's powerful! Here the pastor is no therapist or counselor, but the spokesperson for Christ. He disappears altogether and that man, wracked with guilt, gets the goods. He hears the voice of his Savior forgiving him.

Go through the whole service and you'll find this same reality all over the place. No pastor piped in via screen can look a woman in the eyes who's in the depths of despair as he says, "The peace of the Lord be with you always." The prayer offered for those who are mourning is so much more poignant when everyone present knows the widower who just lost his wife is sitting over in that pew praying along with them. Pastor, lose yourself in the delight of smelling the sheep as they come forward to receive Christ's body and blood from your hand—young and old, weak and strong, lives together and lives that are total chaos—all come and bow their heads and receive this precious gift. And isn't it awesome to lift your hands to bless the people, both your biggest fans and your biggest critics, as you send them back into the world for another week?

Lutheran theology always speaks powerfully to the world, but it seems to me that the time is ripe for some of the strengths that are our bread and butter in WELS. Among these strengths, maybe the best is that the man who stands up in the front of church is the same man who does outreach visits and makes hospital calls and conducts premarital instruction. We're pastor-preachers. That's awesome.

Here's another strength. We're not shopkeeper pastors. We don't merely pay lip service to preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments, while in reality placing as much stock in what sells: the latest trendy thing, the style we choose, etc. With Article V of the Augsburg Confession as our solid foundation,³ we know just how to gather the sheep and dole out their weekly feed. We call it the Divine Service.

It's not glitzy or flashy, and it won't turn you into a TikTok star. But it will accomplish exactly what the Lord wants to accomplish, and that is nothing less than the salvation of souls. Next Sunday, say a prayer of thanksgiving for each person who shows up. Then give God's holy people the holy means of their salvation, and send them home renewed in their baptism, with words of grace and forgiveness echoing in the chambers of their hearts, with a fervent prayer on their lips, mingled with the taste of wine, with the beaming face of their heavenly Father shining upon them as they go.

When the Lord knows we need some encouragement, he'll see to it that the impact of such commonplace things even makes its way back around to us. A man says, "You know, pastor, I remember that one sermon when you said..." and then he recounts what you said and how helpful it was. All the while, you're standing there not even remembering which sermon he's talking about; you've long forgotten it. But that man didn't. It

³ "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe. Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works." AC V, Kolb-Wengert, p. 40. Some time, spend an hour contemplating how AC V is carefully positioned as the bridge between justification (AC IV) and new obedience (AC VI) and how that affects your approach to ministry.

made a difference, because your words brought Christ to that soul at just the right moment. Almost as if God had arranged it all: the pastor, the people, all gathered together around his holy Word and sacraments.

SECOND ENCOURAGEMENT: EMBRACE THE BODY

So, about those online services. I'm of the mind that if you are still taking the time to record and produce a service specifically designed for people to view online, you should cease and desist. First, I think that your time would be better spent on sermon prep and on visiting people. Second, if you think you're going to compete online, you probably don't have the resources to do it well. And even if you do, competing online means you can only win on terms you didn't establish, including such things as short attention span, easily forgotten experiences, and the increasingly studied negative effects of the online media environment. Third, liturgy is not a spectator sport; its beauty lies in the way it requires a group of people to come together to carry it out. Actually, preaching isn't a spectator sport, either. We could stand to teach active listening when we make our kids memorize the "gladly hear and learn it" of the Third Commandment.⁴

Now, someone will say at this point, "But Grandma Betty tells me how much it means to her to be able to watch the services, so we should keep providing them for her." I wholeheartedly agree. What you should do is find a volunteer who will record the congregation as it is assembled for regular worship on Sunday and post that. In so doing, you fulfill the benefit of providing a recording to those who are genuinely unable to gather with the congregation (it's a different story if Grandma Betty can't make it to church but can drive across state lines to see her grandkids perform in the school's annual musical), but you do so at minimal time expense, and you preserve, as much as is possible, the characteristics of worship that are lost when you begin shooting film solely for an online audience.

Everyone has been forced to grapple with the trade-offs between connecting online and in the flesh. Let's not think that this is only a matter of pragmatics. There are theological implications to unpack, and once again, I think that Lutheran theology is especially well-situated to address the present situation. This is a great moment for us to renew our appreciation of the means of grace and the way they show how much God loves our bodies and takes delight in interacting with us bodily.

By Scripture's light, we have the sanest grasp on the body. And I find that people are longing for what we have to offer: a view of the Christian faith that stands in stark contrast to the rising gnosticism of our day. As it pertains to worship, this comes into play in three dimensions: first, in the embodied soul who engages bodily in worship; second, in the body of Christ as it gathers together around font, pulpit and altar; and third, in the body of Christ that is received orally in the sacrament and requires the bodily presence of communicants.

I love the line in Psalm 84 where the son of Korah, who has been daydreaming about the temple with its sparrows and swallows making homes for themselves near the altars of the LORD, turns his attention to those who are absent. They are far away from the temple in body, but their hearts are always yearning to be present there. "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion" (Psalm 84:5). The pilgrim's aching desire is to appear bodily in the courts of the LORD. There will be no rest until "each one appears before God in Zion" (Psalm 84:7).

We know the Christian life is a pilgrimage that culminates in appearing before our Lord in our resurrected bodies and seeing him with our own eyes. Even before that final glory arrives, the Christian's heart longs to

⁴ "Preaching is a participatory act involving both the communicator and the community, in the moment, not simply after the fact. Because we've lost the nuance of participation while listening, sometimes understood as active listening (yet another negative effect of the digital age), we've resigned sermons to purely informational, sometimes inspirational categories. But as Thomas Long reminds us, 'The sermon is action; the sermon is what the preacher speaks joined with what the rest of the congregation hears.' In other words, the sermon is much more than the prepared content of the communicator and its public delivery; it is the sum total of its various elements—speaking, listening, delivering, receiving, responding—and it involves everyone in the room." From *Analog Church* by Jay Y. Kim, pp. 67-68.

appear before the Lord in the place where he encounters the Lord in his body, the place where water was poured over his head, where the Word as it is read and proclaimed enters his ears to reach his heart, where vocal cords tremble and throat, mouth, tongue and lips are active in raising in song and prayer together, where he eats the bread and drinks the cup shoulder-to-shoulder with his brothers and sisters, where the Lord's blessing is spoken over him with lifted hands as Christ once lifted his hands in blessing over his disciples at his ascension. There are so many bodily actions involved in worship, and that is how it is meant to be. God wouldn't have given us tangible means that engage our bodies if he only meant to communicate with us in an exclusively spiritual, ethereal way.

Anyone who sat on a couch during the shutdown and watched church online can reflect on the experience and realize how different it was to not be present bodily at church. Posture makes a difference. There's something to standing for the reading of the Gospel. Sinking into a couch hardly calls me out of my self-indulgence; it makes me more passive and distractible, the posture of consumerism, as I listen to the Word. Nor does a squishy cushion encourage me to offer up my whole being in full-throated praise. Remember how awkward it was to try to sing along with the music blaring from the speakers?⁵

So what we learned from the pandemic is that worshipping virtually is not ideal. It's certainly better than nothing at all. It has a place during a pandemic shutdown. And it continues to have a place for shut-ins, those who are ill, agoraphobes, etc.; it may even function to some degree as a front door to our congregations, a place where outsiders might get a taste of the Gospel. But it cannot replace gathering together in-person. John Kleinig compares virtual worship to looking at a family photograph. It evokes nice memories, but it's not the same as throwing your arms around your loved ones and being there to hear and see and smell them and even to share a meal with them.

Given that many people both within our churches and outside our fellowship have come to the same realization, let me suggest that we are in a prime position to offer the riches of participatory liturgical worship in the flesh. We know how to bring people together bodily and how to engage them in their bodies with God's precious Word and sacraments. Our Gospel-centered use of ritual excels at this. Does that make this a time for us to set aside some of our prejudices against worship customs that involve the body, such as the imposition of ashes or making the sign of the cross? Of course, there is great freedom here, and we would never want to turn customs into a source of righteousness. But in a gnostic age, I think there's something to tracing the sign of the cross over this hunk of flesh that is the "real me" and remembering that once long ago a pastor traced the sign of that cross over me and poured water over my head, giving me eternal life and the sure promise of the resurrection of this body.

Bottom line: what we do with our bodies says a lot about what we value. "Ethically and theologically, we are not where we put our good intentions; we are where we put our bodies."⁶

So we long to appear before the Lord to worship him in our bodies, the bodies he created and redeemed and, on the Last Day, will raise and glorify. But we do not come to worship the Lord alone. The body of Christ gathers together, many members joining together to be one body with the Lord Jesus himself as our Head. We all need to experience this glorious embodiment that is the church, complete with screaming infant in the pew behind us and the old man with wispy hair and sagging ears in the pew in front of us.

⁵ There's more at work here than just the couch—there is also the passivity that the screen induces. But we'll have to save that debate for the third section of this paper.

⁶ The whole quote is so good I had to include it: "Perhaps psychological regression or revived Platonism aren't the problem. Perhaps we have a perfectly good theology of the incarnation and the resurrection, but we just are not convinced by this that a good funeral demands a body. After all, we say, the person is there "in spirit," and the presence of a casket can be more of a clumsy distraction to worship than an asset. We are not amused, though, when a church member heads off to the golf course on Sunday morning, reassuring us that they will be present at worship "in spirit." The body does not lie. Ethically and theologically, we are not where we put our good intentions; we are where we put our bodies. Where your treasure is, where your stuff is, where your body is, there will your heart be also. We would not perform a wedding without the bride, a baptism without the baptismal candidate; so why a funeral without the deceased?" From *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, by Thomas G. Long, p. 32.

Consider the powerful subtexts associated with gathering together. Being in the same space with others tells me that I'm not alone. The Christian life is not easy; it's the way of the cross. I need the reassurance that I am not the only one whose heart is set on the highways to Zion. One thing that we can tell people who think they're just fine watching services by themselves at home is that they are robbing others of their physical presence and, with it, the encouragement that their bodily presence gives.

We could go on to speak of the community that is fostered as sinner-saints meet and fellowship around the means of grace. The paradox is that, while we have never been "more connected," loneliness is at an all-time high. There are people in our congregations who are working remotely and, for many days each week, have hardly any interaction with others. They need what the body of Christ gives. They need brothers and sisters who will share life with them, give them a handshake, look them in the eye, ask them how they're doing.

The beauty of Christian community goes beyond pleasantries and small talk. As the body gathers, there is space for openness and honesty. We don't relate to one another as perfect people, but as fellow sinners who have been redeemed and live by the same grace of the same Lord. We're real with one another, and that opens up the door for us to bear one another's burdens. Again, how can this happen if we aren't present together? With intentionality, I can maintain some friendships via text and Zoom. But how many members of the body of Christ will be neglected or forgotten if they aren't bumped into on a Sunday morning?

Not only do we bear one another's burdens, but we also interact to build one another up in Christian living. We are all reflectors of those around us, and now, more than ever, we are in need of Christian role models who will provide us with examples of Christian character that we might imitate. So when the body of Christ gathers, we don't divide it by age. Young people today need the rare chance to be with older people who are outside of their immediate families. To consider just one example, someone who comes out of a broken home not only needs the teaching of the goodness of God's plan for marriage, but that person also needs to see examples of it in practice. Probably watching an elderly man tenderly helping his even more elderly wife back from the communion rail will do more to form in someone's mind a positive view of lifelong marriage than many sermons on the topic.

Now, here's the challenge. We need to overcome the perception that our gatherings are moments when we are alone together, as if we are carrying out private devotional exercises while standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Take a half hour sometime and think through the pronouns of the Lord's Prayer. Or, when you are in worship, stop singing and take a moment to look closely at the faces of the people who are around you. You have not come to church by yourself. Isn't it wonderful to hear the thunder of many voices reciting the Creed or the beauty of so many lungs and throats and lips engaged in singing the Gospel into one another's ears in the treasures of our hymns and psalms and canticles?

This is never clearer than when God's people eat together. In the Lord's house, at the Lord's Supper, you never dine alone.⁷ When the body of Christ gathers together, we feast together, and this meal binds us in unity with Christ and with one another.

So, the body of Christ gathers in the body to receive the body and blood of Christ. Bodily presence matters. The most important moments in life demand our presence; it's why people give up when the story they're relating falls flat and they say, "You had to be there." Is it any surprise, then, that Christ would show up when his people gather? The teaching of the real presence is that Christ really is with us in his true body and blood. That is no small thing. And it brings to mind another question to ponder: Given the blessings that we receive in the Lord's Supper, has the pandemic brought about a moment when we should reconsider the frequency with which we offer the sacrament?

⁷ What about shut-ins? Don't they dine alone? Not really. In visiting them, the pastor is serving as representative of the congregation as well as representative of Christ. He's not just paying a friendly visit. His presence tells that shut-in, "You are part of our church!"

Hermann Sasse relates the charge that Catholics made about Protestants who excised the Lord's Supper from their services: "When a Protestant goes to church, he finds a preacher; when a Catholic goes to church, he finds Christ." Now, I certainly wouldn't take the Catholic sacrifice of the mass or adoration of the host, let alone what passes for preaching in Catholicism. But the charge rings true for too many non-Lutherans, for whom "going to church" means going to be entertained by a loose collection of songs surrounding one very long, stirring, and inspirational talk.⁸ At the end of the service, what they've gotten is a preacher (and probably a lot of the third use of the Law).

Do you see the brilliant Lutheran middle here that eviscerates the Catholic charge? We have preaching that brings Christ, and we have the sacrament that brings Christ. The two go hand-in-hand, and the end result is that when a Lutheran goes to church, she can't help but *receive* Christ, in her ears as well as in her mouth, just as Christ himself promised. Which is a pretty good reason for us to celebrate the Lord's Supper often.

I can speak of a couple benefits I have found from the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper in my congregation. For one thing, it clarifies preaching and keeps it Christ-centered. I think of the preaching task as moving people from the font to the altar. Preaching is drowning the old sinful flesh, raising the new man to life, and inviting him to dine at the meal which joins past and future, in which those who eat the bread and drink the cup proclaim Christ's death until he comes.

Then there is the way that communion binds the body of Christ together in love. Many of our post-communion collects include a petition for this, like "increase our love for another," and it has been my experience that, as it pertains to horizontal forgiveness and love, everything falls into place at the communion rail. To expand a little more on this thought, we could probably stand to extol such forward-facing benefits of the Lord's Supper more than we do. We are pretty good at preaching people to the Lord's Supper to receive forgiveness for their sins, which we will never tire of faithfully extolling. But we should also point people to the spiritual benefits that follow as they leave the rail; the sacrament fuels sanctified living. Again, check out the post-communion collects and see how often they include a petition like, "Help us live as your holy people."

Given the benefit and blessing that the Lord's Supper gives, then, we want our members to receive it often. However, "often" can vary. My sense is that a lot of people nowadays consider once or twice a month to be regular church attendance. Someone who comes to church that infrequently might miss the sacrament for extended periods of time if it is not offered every Sunday.

What about visitors? I no longer stress about visitors showing up on a communion Sunday. Because it's just something our congregation does every single week, we don't feel the need to hide the Lord's Supper or apologize about our closed communion practice. In fact, we've even gained members who came to our church because we practice closed communion.

In our incarnate age we need the concrete embodiment that the real presence in the Lord's Supper gives us. Ultimately, it's the body and blood of Jesus that bind us to the other members of the body of Christ and that deliver to us, bodily, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

THIRD ENCOURAGEMENT: PROVIDE SANCTUARY

Hopefully up to this point you've gathered that my encouragement is for us to double-down on what we already excel at doing on Sunday morning. Relying entirely on the means of grace, it's enough to gather God's people together and preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. In so doing, we delight in the way God calls a man to shepherd his flock and tend to his sheep, and we build people up in the sanity we have regarding the body, the body of Christ, and the body and blood of Christ that tie the two together. Let me

⁸ Even Evangelicals are realizing this. Not long ago Francis Chan opened a presentation by saying something to the effect that for fifteen hundred years the center of worship was not the pulpit but the table. Listen at about minute 21:30: <https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9mZWVkcyc5tZWdhcGhvbmUuZm0vVEhjUjk4MTYyMDgwMzU/episode/ODQwNWU2MmUtYjNiZi0xMwVjLWE2ZGEtY2YwM2M0YjRjNGM4?ep=14>

dwell on one more strength. Our services provide sanctuary. The service is a blessed relief, a pause, a moment each week when the hurry and pressure of life is set aside and we step out of the world and into the Sabbath rest of our God.

There are many differences between “out there” and life in the church, but this one stands out to me more and more. The *Zeitgeist* of our day is pessimism. We’re living in a stewing cauldron of anger and fear. Peruse the headlines for about a nanosecond and you get the point. If this is what’s filling our people’s minds on a daily basis, let’s be sure to give them something dramatically different on Sunday morning.

Providing sanctuary means that when people come to church, they are not going to be militantly conscripted into the culture wars. We will preach the whole counsel of God, of course. Only let the tone of our preaching be consistent with the hope and joy and peace that is ours in Christ. Let our proclamation of truth be spoken in Christian love. At the end of the day, what we’re after is so much bigger than the small topics that generate wild headlines: we’re working to etch Christ deeper and deeper into the hearts of those who are gathered. And the more we focus on that, the more our people will come to sense that they are stepping out of the fray and into the sanctuary, the place where the Lord holds us together and where we shine like stars in the midst of a crooked and depraved generation.

So, if you are gathering God’s people around Word and sacrament, and you’re preaching Christ, you’re giving people blessed relief from an angry and nihilistic world. But I think you can provide even more sanctuary by doing less. I think the time is ripe for us to reconsider the use of technology in the worship space, and maybe scale it back or eliminate some of it altogether.

If I were to argue for something radical, like getting rid of screens in the worship space, solely on the basis of practicalities, I would say a couple of things. First, getting tech prepped takes time, and doing it well takes even more time. I would argue that that time would be better spent on sermon prep or on visiting people. Second, if you really want to set your sanctuary apart, make it the one place people gather nowadays that isn’t chock full of screens. Third, the negative effects of screen life are becoming increasingly clear. Have we thought carefully about unintended consequences?

But I believe there is a deeper argument to be made here. I believe that God’s Word is primarily meant to be heard; we are called to preach, not to project, the Gospel. This is consistent with Jesus’s own practice. When Jesus told the parable of the sower, he didn’t say, “He who has eyes to read, let him read!” but rather, “He who has ears.”

This is not to diminish the importance of reading the Scriptures, but from your own experience you can sense the difference between encountering words in the ear versus on the page or, different still, on the screen.⁹ I challenge you to think of the most memorable powerpoint slide you’ve ever seen. If you can think of one, I’d wager that it had an image on it. Contrast that with words that you’ve heard. Not only do you remember the last meaningful thing that was said to you, you can’t forget it. You can still hear the tone of voice. It sticks with you.

Even when we read (at least, when I read), we hear a voice inside our heads. Our Greek and Hebrew professors thought it important for us to read aloud. There is something about audible words that is powerful. Things have to be happening in order for them to be heard: either vocal cords vibrating or a speaker producing sound waves that ripple through the air. There’s activity in the spoken word, whereas words printed on a page are, by themselves, inert.

⁹ Differences between the screen and the page: the page is tactile and engages touch and sight, while the screen engages only the eyes; what is printed on the page never changes, while the screen is constantly on the move; holding paper or a book in your hand allows you to see the broader context and to move backwards and forwards, while the screen forces you to encounter words in isolated snippets that move in one direction only. Contemplate what’s different about singing a hymn when you can see all the stanzas on the page as opposed to maybe one or two stanzas at a time as part of a slide deck.

All of this is to say that we shouldn't overlook the primacy of hearing the Word (even while we encourage faithful Bible reading—maybe faithful Bible reading aloud? See 1 Timothy 4:13). Don't let anyone fool you with talk about how we're visual learners nowadays. Think about how popular podcasts are. Most of what we take in, we take in through our ears.¹⁰ But I'm not tell you anything new—every Wisconsin deer hunter knows this already. When you're sitting in a deer stand, what's the most likely way you'll notice a deer is coming? By hearing that big buck's footsteps rustling through the leaves. No one likes to hunt on a windy day.

So, as it pertains to worship: I believe the drawbacks to using a screen outweigh the benefits. Screens are for presenting information, but we are preaching the deep truths of the faith and etching Christ on the heart. Screens make things ephemeral, but God's Word is lasting and endures forever. Screens present information piecemeal and disjointed, but we want our people to see how all things hold together in Christ.

Screens also demand to be the center of attention. If you didn't hear the deer coming, then you spotted it because it moved. So, if you have a screen that is changing, it's going to draw attention to itself.¹¹ Do you want your people's attention to be riveted to the screen, or would it be devotionally better for their attention to be drawn to the architectural symbols of the means of grace, the font, pulpit, and altar—things that do not change from week to week or moment to moment?

If you are going to use a screen, then take some time to be philosophical about it. Ask yourself what you're trying to accomplish, and how the tool will help you accomplish that task. Be aware of unintended consequences. As the saying goes, "We shape our tools, and ever after they shape us." How will what you're doing contribute to shaping your people in a way that conforms to Christ and his cross? How might it shape them in ways that aren't beneficial?

I'm encouraging you to consider whether providing sanctuary nowadays might mean unplugging. That would truly be a change from our screen-addicted world. It would set our time in God's Word apart, and it might encourage us to see one another a little more clearly as well. And we don't have to worry about worship being boring; it never is. You and I might be boring. But Christ is never boring. Our people won't grow tired of hearing the Gospel.

So be countercultural and engage the body as you provide sanctuary, but do so with judicious use of technological crutches. Our heritage of liturgical worship has already given us plenty to work with IRL¹²: the feel of a crisp new hymnal in the hands, the colors of paraments and vestments, the sight and smell of candles, the music and the melodies, the taste of bread and wine, the beauty of the Word as it is read. We might as well stop trying to compete with the rest of the world for a tiny slice of the attention pie. Show some reverence for the Word, and people will respond. Holy things are taking place here!

PRACTICE THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:4-9:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹What you have

¹⁰ The combo of eyes and ears in real life or in video is especially engaging.

¹¹ Double that if it's in color—try turning your phone or laptop to grayscale for a day and see how much less appealing it is to surf the net in black and white.

¹² IRL is texting shorthand for "in real life." That this shorthand exists discloses the fact that even the most devoted texter understands existence mediated via a screen is less than the full human experience the heart longs for.

learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

We are bedeviled in English by the pronoun “you,” which fails to identify itself as singular or plural (unless you’re a Texan for whom there is y’all and then there is all y’all). In a psychologically me-centered world, this is a real tripping hazard. Have you considered that Saint Paul might not be talking about an individual’s emotional state of being in Philippians 4:4-9? The verbs and pronouns are second person *plural*. Saint Paul is addressing the congregation in Philippi and spelling out the parameters of their shared life in Christ. When God’s people get together, what are they to do? They are to rejoice, to pray, to give thanks. They are to think of what is best, true, virtuous, worthy of praise. They are to imitate the examples of those who are ahead of them in Christian maturity. They are to receive the blessing of God’s peace.

In short, you could read Philippians 4:4-9 as a manual for the gathering of God’s people in worship. It actually makes better sense to read it this way. An individual’s emotional state of being can hardly be commanded. But when God’s people gather together, even when their hearts are saddened, they are still to rejoice. Think of a Christian funeral. There is grief, and yet those gathered are rejoicing in the life and resurrection of Christ. We never fail to convict of sin or to mourn over our sinfulness and the brokenness of this world, yet each week the beating pulse of our worship is rejoicing, the joy of forgiveness in Christ.

Christians gather to rejoice, but it’s not always easy to gather with others who aren’t like us. “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone” is addressed to a congregation that was suffering from divisions. The word (ἐπιεικής) means something like not insisting on one’s rights. This is of utmost importance to Paul so that the congregation will enjoy unity and so that the Gospel witness will not be hindered by a mismatch between words and actions within the body of Christ. I hardly need to state the necessity of this word for all our congregations, having lived through the divisive days of COVID and its effect on congregational life.

After this, Paul commands them not to be anxious about anything, because the Lord is near. Again, read this with the gathered congregation in view. Are we anxious about how many people aren’t coming to worship any longer? Are we worried or fretting about the future of our congregation? Are we concerned that the church in our day is losing ground, or that the powers of evil are going to destroy us? No. The Lord is near. All summer long we will recall in the proper preface that he is with us to shepherd his flock, whenever we two or three gather in his name.

When God’s people gather, they pray, praise, and give thanks. So this is what we do. Our service begins with the Kyrie, moves through the Prayer of the Day, asks for all things and prays for all people in the Prayer of the Church, and brackets the celebration of the Lord’s Supper with prayers. Gathered together by the Lord, refreshed in his Gospel, and having laid all our cares and concerns before his throne, the congregation receives peace in an unsettled and hostile world, peace which cannot be found anywhere else. Call it sanctuary.

Then Paul goes on to address the things that fill our minds. Think of worship as the time when Christians gather together to redirect attention to what is true, honorable, just, etc. The One Great Subject of our services is always Christ. No one and nothing is more true, noble, virtuous and praiseworthy than Christ. We can give our people nothing better than to leave church with Christ filling their minds. Think of it like the way a good book or movie calls for imitation. Remember when you were a kid and you watched Star Wars and right afterwards you fashioned a makeshift lightsaber to go fight the bad guys? This is what Christ-centered worship accomplishes. It calls God’s people into imitation of all that is best and virtuous and praiseworthy by showing us the beauty of Christ.¹³

Finally, Paul encourages the Philippians to find role models, people whom they can follow and emulate. That’s why we gather together in our local congregations, to know and be known. A plug here for good male role

¹³ A word here in appreciation of aesthetics in worship—marrying truth and beauty is especially powerful in forming the heart and filling the mind with the best things.

models. Men, be an example to the younger men and boys in your congregation. Let them see a godly man in action. Let them see you bow your head and pray, manfully and mightily confess the creed, listen to God's Word and obey it. Let them see you repent. Let them see you use your strength to love and serve others. There are eyes watching you, and that's a good thing, if only we follow the example of Christ.

And over this all—the peace of God will be with you. Believe this, my friends. All of God's elect are safe and secure in his hands. Not one of them will be lost. If it were up to us, the church would be in serious trouble. But it's not. It's up to our gracious God. He has brought us through these last several years, difficult as they have been. He has been with us every step of the way. His promises won't fail us, and nothing that we will have to face in the future will change the unshakeable foundation on which our hope is built. Not even the gates of Hades stand a chance against the bride of Christ!

With that confidence, let's carry out the ministry God has given us to do. Let's be messengers of this Gospel, letting it call out of us our best in preaching. Let's administer the sacraments faithfully, bringing the tangible, bodily goodness of God's grace to the embodied souls God has created and redeemed. Let's pray with the confidence that our cares and concerns are known to the Father. And let's leave with God's blessing of peace upon us.

FOR DISCUSSION

What bodily practices have you found helpful for keeping focused on Christ as he comes to us in the means of grace?

Weigh the benefits and drawbacks of offering the Lord's Supper every weekend.

Jay Kim writes, "What I am suggesting is that we understand and utilize online platforms for what they truly are—a helpful digital means to a greater incarnational end." How have you navigated this dynamic in your congregation as it pertains to posting services online?

How do you approach the issue of technology in worship?