

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered-Down

Tuesday, September 29, 2020

Real Church, Emergency Church & Fake Church

No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his Mother.
—St. Cyprian, d. 258

Now you are the body of Christ, and each of you is a part of it. —1 Corinthians 12:27

And in him [Christ] you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. —Ephesians 2:22

“How the Church has changed over this year!” We have heard this remark voiced numerous times, sometimes as a lament for earlier days, and sometimes in a more hopeful tone by young and enthusiastic Christians, often with a bent toward digital technology. This has been a very different year for the Church as we have often had to connect by Zoom, recorded services and YouTube, telephone conversations, e-mails, and even regular old mail. I have heard a number of clergy telling their flock that “We are learning that Church is not just a gathering in a particular building,” and that all sorts of exciting things are happening in the Church in this strange but wonderful time. There is much truth to celebrate in such exhortations and God does amazing things in trying times, but such remarks also call for a few warnings. As we have seen the Church take on a very different shape this year, we do well to consider just what the Church is supposed to be, and what kind of normal we want to return to in the post virus future.

Church, in its most literal sense, means *a gathering or congregation*. In New Testament times this word referred to the gatherings of citizens of a city. Indeed, the Church is people and not a building. We have all been reminded at one time or another that a Church is not the steeple, but the people! The New Testament word for Church says nothing of building, but it does tell of *gathering*! It is important that we congregate, for Christ has called us to be together. We are to be joined together into something greater than a bunch of individuals. We are to be joined tightly together as the Body of Christ, and as Christ’s Body we are to carry on Christ’s work. Other times in the New Testament we are compared to living stones, joining together to form a temple for Christ’s dwelling! Yes, the Spirit of God is with each believer, but note how God dwells among us in special power as we *gather*. This is **Real Church**.

For the while we are still in a temporary phase which I think of as **Emergency Church**. The virus continues to separate us, and so we try to connect any which way we can. Here is where the digital steps in to save the day. We are now physically gathering at St. Luke’s, but there are still many who are wise to stay away for health

reasons. And so we work to stay connected, and accept that we are still unable to fully gather. We may not be all together as we would like and as we have done before, but we are being a real and legitimate Church of Jesus Christ as we continue in this emergency mode. And this is not completely new. There have always been those who for some reason or another could not be with the gathered saints on the Lord's Day. I think of Paul in prison. In dire circumstances Emergency Church is a truly Real Church, but as we look ahead to a post-virus life there is another form of Church which looms large, very possible and very scary. I call it **Fake Church**.

Fake Church is when we continue to use convenient emergency methods once the emergency is over. "I'm getting to like sleeping late and then relaxing in front of my computer screen, sipping coffee and catching the latest service in my skivvies. And when I sleep too late, or am busy with other things I can catch it later on YouTube. This arrangement saves gas too!"

A Real Church congregates. Cyprian the Church Father told us that "*No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his Mother.*" Many have objected to this remark, convinced that the Church is only trying to control people and assure their own income. But consider the New Testament's teaching. Believers are *always* to be in gathering mode, and as we gather at St. Luke's great things happen that would not otherwise happen, like *Lunch with Luke*, Vacation Bible School with lots of kids, and energetic worship. This is what being the Body of Christ and forming a temple for God's dwelling is all about. This message has always been a hard sell for we Americans, for we tend to think very individualistically. If only I had a dollar for every time I hear someone pose the loaded and deceptive question, "But can't someone be a Christian and not go to Church?"

We are called to congregate so that we can be the Real Church. We are only beginning to emerge from Emergency Church mode, and this method of Church is just fine while there is an emergency, but once this virus lifts, let us be sure to return to the real thing! (And please do not think me insensitive to the truly shut-in for whom Emergency Church is a real and ongoing necessity!) God save us from the seductive and convenient Fake Church.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim,

God, our Shepherd, give to the Church a new vision and a new charity, new wisdom and fresh understanding, the revival of her brightness and the renewal of her unity; that the eternal message of thy Son, undefiled by the traditions of men, may be hailed as the good news of the new age; through him who maketh all things new, Jesus Christ our Lord. —Percy Dearmer, 1867-1936