

A colleague noted that given the environment forced on us by the pandemic, we could never think about our communities in the same way. We realized how similar we are, how our programming is very much alike, and our worship--though nuanced--also of a kind. Would we be willing to experiment with the new reality presented to us? Would we return to the same old ways of doing things once the pandemic has passed? Would we learn anything that we might apply. I'm not sure what the answers to those questions will be. I hope that we continue to experiment. I hope that we don't return to the same way of doing things. I hope that we apply some of what we learned. But I know that routine, rhythm, and a sense of groundedness can create comfort. That which is good and bad. Good because we need those elements in life for the life to flourish. Bad because resting solely in comfort removes us from the very life that we hope might flourish. As with so many things, it's about balance.

However, realizing things and being able to apply them are two different things. Seeking to move a little beyond the comfort zone, I proposed to a number of Christian clergy colleagues that we try an experiment during Lent. Given that we are all streaming, could we venture into Lenten worship that invites our parishes to each others' worship space on Sunday during Lent? That is, one week we all worship at St. Francis, the next week we worship at St. John's Lutheran, and so on. Could we pry ourselves away from the way that we always do things to imagine and create a reality that wasn't just a COVID experiment but anticipates the type of collaboration we will need in the future?

The unfortunate answer was no. Of all the clergy whom I asked, only one was willing to entertain the idea. One noted that they had their own plan. Another feigned interest but, "knew that the parish wouldn't accept it." One blatantly confessed that they were doing all they could to keep things together at their parish. Which are all fine and real responses. And trying such an experiment wasn't necessarily going to change the world. Yet, I was struck by the reticence to try. To try something new, something different, something outside of one's comfort zone. I am mindful that I often occupy the same position, so this is not a judgment. It is an observation of how difficult keeping the balance can be.

Henri Nouwen has a famous image that he uses for prayer. A woman is being admitted to a psychiatric hospital. As a part of the intake, the nurses have to take her various belongings. She is left with a small coin. She squeezes it so tightly to herself that a couple nurses are required to pry it loose. Nouwen notes that the coin is not of value. It will not help her. But she clings to it nonetheless. Prayer, in Nouwen's mind, is like that. Not clinging to things, but opening up one's hands and one's being to experience the world. Lord knows doing this can be a scary thing, for the world can be scary at times. However, this is the invitation that we are given. To open up our hands in prayer and to open up our lives as ongoing prayers in and of themselves.

The image that Nouwen offers also works for giving of ourselves. We can be like the woman and cling to what we have, even if it will certainly not save us. I know that impulse.

Particularly, given this year, I am extremely mindful of this inclination. Thus, it is all the more amazing when I look at the graph for our pledging for the upcoming year. It's staggering. New pledges. A majority of pledges increased or remained the same. It is a sign of the receptiveness of this community to not cling but open their hands. And that is a spiritual act. An act that I am extremely grateful for, because I know that this year has been difficult, hard, depressing, and anxiety-producing. When I consider the graph, I consider all the lives that make it so, all the lives that make St. Francis St. Francis, and I give thanks. I know the faith, the courage, and the hope that makes these acts possible. And I am gratified to minister with you, people who are willing to try new things, put on a different experience, and see what happens. There is a nimbleness to this posture, and it leads to life. THANK YOU!