

When It's Hard to be the Church

Dale Bishop

I've been reflecting on what I've been missing in worship as we're compelled to do it "distantly" during the pandemic. One of the things I miss is singing. Singing is about as close as I get to being uninhibited. For other people it's dancing, or perhaps dancing *and* singing, but dancing is definitely not my forte. Think Elaine in a particularly hilarious episode of *Seinfeld*. But I love to sing, and most of the singing I've done in my life has been in church. My parents got me started one Christmas season when I was about 4 and I sang, of all things, "Up on the Housetop," at some program in the church sanctuary. I had casts on both of my club feet, and my father held me in his arms while I sang. My parents loved to tell me how the congregation clapped, something *never* done in our congregation of dour Germans. I'm sure that our stern pastor, Reverend Beck, did not approve. But how can you frown at a temporarily crippled four-year-old singing a happy Christmas song?

I say all this about singing in church in full recognition of the fact that the music department in churches is all too frequently considered the "war department;" and out of the lived experience that hymn selection is often the hardest part of putting together a worship service. I served as an interim pastor in one church where a predecessor had been nearly undone when the church council decided that members of the congregation should be the ones to choose the hymns every Sunday. They didn't like hymns that were unfamiliar, even if they were chosen in light of the scripture of the day, and/or the sermon; even if their melodies were familiar melodies from their beloved hymns. I attempted to de-escalate things by devoting a worship service to those beloved hymns, having polled the congregation, and the sermon involved giving some of the background

to the hymns. Check out the story behind “Abide With Me,” or “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” But there was a guy in another congregation I served, a guy I really liked, who made a practice of slamming his hymnal shut after the singing of most hymns. He timed the slam so that it would be heard. “Why do they all have to be from the 18th century?” he once asked. But on another occasion he complained that he found contemporary hymns unsingable because he didn’t know the melodies. People have surprisingly strong and sometimes contradictory feelings about hymns.

But I love church music—anthems and hymns, along with Bach fugues on the organ. So it seemed to me to be yet another indignity inflicted by this damned virus to learn that singing in an enclosed space turns out to be one of the most effective ways to transmit the virus from person to person. There was that famous choir practice in Washington state, when two-thirds of the participants were infected. Who knew that singing a hymn in church might be more lethal even than passing the peace, whether by hugging or handshake? Once we are back together in a common worship space, I’m guessing that humming might be as close as we’ll get to singing for quite some time. Let’s say it again. It’s hard to be the church these days, at least the church as we have known it.

It’s hard to be the church when we’re at a distance from one another. It’s hard to feel part of a community when other members of the community are disembodied spectators united by computer screens, or invisible readers in the privacy of their homes, or even when we’re together but confined to those little blocks during Zoom sessions. One of our sacraments, after all, is communion, which is all about togetherness. Virtual togetherness is better than isolation, to be sure, but it’s a poor replacement for physical presence with one another. So yes, during this pandemic, it’s hard to be the church.

And being the church is inextricably linked to worship, although certainly not limited to it. One of the things I learned as a pastor was that the worship experience shapes the congregational experience beyond the time actually spent in the sanctuary. It would be

harder to fire off that angry email after a virtual church meeting, if you knew that you were going to be sharing a pew with the target of your verbal venom, after you've actually been asked to "pass the peace" with that person, looking him or her in the eye after having been reminded of Christ's commandment to love one another.

When we can't worship together, our communal life beyond the walls of the church also suffers. Worship isn't a performance. It's an act of devotion to God and to each other as children of God. So when we can't worship together, it's hard to be the church. It requires an extra measure of prayer, meditation, and reaching out to one another in ways that don't require physical proximity. And it requires forgiveness—of others for perceived or real slights and of ourselves when we realize that something we've said (written) or done has inflicted pain on someone else. And we need to forgive ourselves for our sense of loss, which sometimes manifests itself in angry ways, during a time when we're deprived of things we love about church.

But there is a more profound way we're challenged to be the church during this time in our collective experience, one that brings together the limits posed by the pandemic and our gut-wrenching crisis in the aftermath of the lynching in Minneapolis.

One of the conversations that shaped my understanding of the church was with a Middle Eastern Christian leader who said to me, "It must be hard to be a Christian in the United States." I was gob-smacked by his comment. He was, after all, from a predominantly Muslim society where Christians are tolerated but not equal. Being tolerated is better than not being tolerated, but toleration implies that someone else has the power to define one's status and value. Toleration can be withdrawn; equality can only be lost, even though our faith tells us that our fundamental equality as God's children can never be taken away.

What my friend meant when he spoke of the difficulty of being a Christian in the United States was paradoxically that it is too easy to be a Christian in the United States. Being a

follower of Jesus has to do with risk. In fact it is part of the deal. It has to do with loss of our cherished security for the sake of our immortal souls. We are not called to be safe; we are called to follow the one who risked all for our sakes. This doesn't mean, I hasten to say, that we should all flock into church sanctuaries during a pandemic—suicide and inflicting disease on others are not Christian values. But it does mean is that at a certain point we have to differentiate between our culture and our faith, sometimes in ways that risk our standing in the community, our respectability, or even our lives.

This is what makes the President's political appropriation of a church and the Bible earlier this week such an important and instructive moment. The church is not a prop for a political agenda—wherever on the political spectrum that agenda may be. It's a place where people gather to discern God's will, to be equipped for God's mission, and to submit ourselves together to the One in whom we live and move and have our very being. It's a place of community, not a place of performance. And the Bible is not a weapon to be wielded against those with whom we disagree; it is a humble book that represents our continuing dialogue with past, present and future, our dialogue with God and with each other. It is sacred not because it possesses some kind of divine aura, but because it has meaning, because it recounts God's gracious intervention in our lives, and God's continuing challenge to us to learn and to do God's will.

It's easy to be a cultural Christian; it's hard and inexpressibly joyful to be a follower of Jesus. But, embedded in the Christian enigma is also the reality that Christ's yoke easy in the sense that it is simple. We simply have to give up our old life to get a new and full, or abundant one. We have to love not with mushy or sentimental self-interested love, but with a love that accepts and affirms, and stands with those who are different, those who are poor, those who have been on the receiving end of injustice. Such love has nothing to do with a triumphal stance in front of a building—even a building topped by a cross ; it has nothing to with a triumphalist wielding of a Bible which is sacred only when it is

actually read and lived. Such love has to do with a living faith that reminds us that being first means being last, that losing our life means saving it.