

Forward to Church

In many congregations, September includes a "Back to Church" Sunday. At least it did in pre-pandemic days. Then, it was back to the program year, back to Sunday school, back to the habit of attending worship after a summer that might have included a vacation from church. This year, in the throes of continuing changes due to the novel coronavirus, I hear people speak longingly about going "back to church." Usually what they seem to mean is, back to the way things used to be before the pandemic.

I invite us to shift our language, to shift the direction of our focus. Instead of talking about going *back* to church, let's plan to go *forward* to church. I suggest this for a number of reasons.

The language "back to church" suggests that we've been away since March, and that is simply not the case. Our congregations have been worshipping faithfully all these months, some with live-streaming of services from the church building or from another location, some via ZOOM or Facebook Live, some worshipping in person outdoors. Many of our congregations have continued to serve the wider community through hands-on ministries, particularly enhancing food security for vulnerable individuals and families. We never stopped going to church during this pandemic. We never stopped being the Church. So the language of "going back" suggests something that isn't true.

Soon, congregations in parts of the Diocese where health district benchmarks have been met may begin to gather in person inside the church building, following strict distancing and other protocols. Other congregations in those health districts have chosen not to gather in person, given that the limit on the number of people who can gather would prevent the entire congregation from being together. Those congregations choose to wait until everyone can worship in person safely. In both situations, the language of "going back" isn't accurate or helpful, since entire congregations cannot worship together until a vaccine is developed, approved and widely used.

Even more important, there is no going back because we are being changed in this time. The Church is being changed. As we learn new ways of worshipping together when we are not in person together, we find that our worship includes people who had not come to church before. Family members from far away join in. People who, for whatever reason, have not felt safe walking into a church building are clicking onto online worship and finding spiritual nourishment. We are in a profound moment of evangelism, of sharing our faith experiences and sharing the love of Jesus with others. We'd be faithless to turn back from that.

We are being changed as we hunger for the Eucharist during a time of fasting from the sacrament. That hunger is revealing much about what is deeply important to us. It is revealing to us that Jesus is present not only in the bread and wine, but in other daily and ordinary experiences -- in the smile of a child, in the text from a friend that is full of assurance, in a phone call from a church member who simply asks how we are. Jesus who revealed himself after his resurrection in the simple act of breaking bread reveals himself to us in simple and ordinary ways every day.

As we celebrate the Eucharist with less frequency in this time of pandemic, we are experiencing anew the breadth of our Episcopal tradition and heritage. We are a people of "word and sacrament." As we participate in the sacrament less frequently for a time, we are rediscovering the depth and wonder of the word as we participate in the daily offices -- Morning Prayer, Noonday Prayer, Evening Prayer and Compline. I've heard from more than a few faithful Episcopalians who had never prayed Compline before this pandemic and who have found in it deep peace at the end of the day.

We've also been learning that Church is a whole lot more than a building. Before the pandemic, I imagine that when most people heard the word "church," they immediately had a visual image of a building with a cross and a steeple. Once this pandemic is over and we've learned what God is teaching us in this time, I hope that when people hear the word "church" they'll picture community and service in the world.

We are being changed -- for the better. There is no going back. Instead, let's go Forward to Church. Forward into the new ways that God is shaping us. Forward into our church buildings with renewed commitment to going out. Forward into our church buildings with increased attentiveness and responsiveness to those who are not in the building. Forward into our church buildings with hybrid worship that feeds those present in person and those who cannot be present in person. Forward into our church buildings and forward into the world for the sake of the love of Jesus.

What will Forward to Church look like in your congregation and in your setting? How will you go Forward to Church for the sake of a world so in need of Jesus' healing grace and love.