

# The Church Is Other People

Why We Need to Gather in Person

Noah Van Niel

ON A BOOKSHELF IN MY OFFICE I have a small replica of *The Cathedral* by Auguste Rodin, bought at the Rodin Museum in Philadelphia when I lived there many years ago. I was taken with its simple beauty: two hands, suspended in time, their fingertips barely touching, forming a gentle arch like the buttresses of a Gothic cathedral. At first glance the statue appears to show hands brought together in prayer, but on closer examination you realize it actually depicts two right hands – what initially presents as a private moment of piety is actually a moment of connection between two individuals. The “cathedral” is contained in the space between two people about to hold hands. Lovers? Strangers? We do not know. All we see is the promise of touch, connection, communion, frozen inches away from realization.

Recently I have had a lot of time to contemplate this statue. It is positioned just over my shoulder in the little Zoom window which has been my primary source of connection with my parish these last few months. As I log hours of screen time trying to hold together a congregation – each member confined to his or her own little window – the statue has started to taunt me with everything I am missing and longing for: Touch. Connection. Community.

The hands are not the only reminder of what I long for during this time of pandemic. As I make my way through the New Testament in my daily devotions the moments that speak most loudly are the times when Jesus is with people. He is almost always with people. From the outset of his ministry he recruits disciples to follow him. He brings huge crowds together to teach. He travels with people and enters their houses to eat and stay with them; he gets right up into their faces to touch and heal them; he washes their feet; he puts their children on his knee. Close contact with other human beings, to communicate the presence and power of God, is essential to the movement he founded.

Likewise, as I read Paul’s letters, I remember that while he was the church’s great founding theologian – making meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and speaking of them far and wide – most of his effort was given to forming, nurturing, and sustaining communities of people. For Paul, the keystone of the Christian way was the *ekklesia*, the communal gathering in which one could practice, in the flesh, a way of being together, existing primarily *with* and *for* one another. This gathering was the core unit of the faith, and he spilled much ink trying to keep those disparate units together, for without those bodies, there was no Body of Christ.

This remains the primary work of the church. You learn quickly when you enter the ministry that despite the high talk of heavenly calling, we are primarily in the people business. We spend almost as much time preparing for and attending fellowship events and meetings as we do reading scripture and theology. Our presence at picnic tables and potlucks is as important as our presence at the Eucharistic table on Sunday mornings. This is not a distraction from ministry, but an essential part of it. Christian discipleship was never meant to be an isolated endeavor; it has always meant creation of, participation in, and care for community. One’s individual relationship with God is expected to shape how one functions in relationship with others, so facilitating and nurturing real, physical connections between people is a critical function of the church.

This commitment to community is grounded in the doctrine of the Incarnation. An incarnational understanding of the world holds that the wondrous works of God are almost always revealed in and through bodies. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” “A virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” “Take, eat, this is my body, this is my blood.” “Reach out your hand and put it in my side.” From Christmas through Easter and across the rest of the liturgical year, the Christian faith is built on corporeal events meant to communicate that God is revealed in the physical realm. When we occupy a common space, there is energy, electricity; a spirit is kindled. It can be felt in the crowd at a sporting event or when sitting silently by the hospital bed of a loved one. Physical presence matters in ways that are impossible to measure but impossible to deny. This is why, in an increasingly fragmented world, the church remains one of the few places whose express intent is to create close contact with other people – because we believe it’s good for you, because we believe that God is to be experienced most fully in community and connection. It’s why we take great pride in opening our doors to newcomers and old-timers, friends and strangers. To have the banker and the busker rubbing shoulders at the same altar is a sign of glory in our eyes. Because to us the body is a place of divine revelation, and bodies gathered together bring the Spirit of God to life.

All that is missing right now. It’s going to be a long time before we’re all holding hands again or sharing the same air. This is spiritual starvation as well as social – so long as we must remain physically distant, the church cannot be what it was created to be. Until we can all gather again in person, to eat and sing and pray and work, the Body of Christ is not whole: it is wounded. That is not to say the church cannot be helpful and comforting and do good work in this time. But what people are longing for right now –



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touch, community, connection – are precisely the things we were made to give them, and cannot.

It is hard to overstate just how frustrating this is to a church leader. And none of the options we're presently offered for proceeding can completely alleviate that frustration. Reopening churches as usual, without any restrictions, gives us the gift of incarnated community but jeopardizes the very bodies we seek to celebrate as revelations of the divine. Saint Paul said to the Corinthians about their communal gatherings, "Now in the following instructions, I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse" (1 Cor. 11:17). And if Paul were alive today, I think he would count potentially spreading a disease as infectious and deadly as the coronavirus as "for the worse."

Another option is to open to very small groups of people, none of whom can be at "high risk," and to undertake rigorous screening, distancing, and safety protocols – no singing, no touching, no communion – before we can worship "together." This provides a minimally satisfying in-person worship experience, serving instead to emphasize current fractures in the community as well as feelings of division and loneliness. Yet another approach is not to reopen at all until the virus is defeated, using instead livestream or recorded services, insisting that the church can keep being the church without the physical gathering that has always been at its heart. So calendars are filled with Zoom calls, Sunday worship is streamed, and meanwhile bodies languish in isolation.

Instead of a satisfying way forward, we are left with a desire that cannot be met. An absence that cannot be filled. A yearning that is perpetual.

But what if that were its own instructive place to dwell? In an age of immediate gratification, we may be used to getting what we need relatively quickly, but in our spiritual tradition, the concept of holy longing is not new. We long for heaven while we are on earth. We long for peace in a world of war. We long for justice in a world that continually frustrates those aims. We long for God yet meet him only sparingly. The great mystical theologians speak at length about the sense of unfulfilled desire at the heart of their prayer life. Gregory of Nyssa holds desire (eros) to be the force that continually propels us toward God; Julian of Norwich calls it a "thirst"; Teresa of Ávila calls it the "wound of love," which comes from God and is meant to draw us back to God. And Saint Augustine once wrote, "The whole life of a good Christian is an holy desire," because "by longing, you are made capable. ... God, by deferring our hope, stretches our desire; by the desiring, stretches the mind; by stretching, makes it more capacious. Let us desire therefore, my brethren, for we shall be filled." In this time of frustration, the perpetual yearning we know so well could be preparing us for something even greater.

Perhaps, as Augustine implies, this prolonged period of

unfulfilled desire will widen our hearts, increasing our empathy for those who live in a perpetual state of longing for what is denied them – peace, justice, equality, safety – all those whose deepest needs remain unmet. And perhaps now, having been deprived of people and connection and community for so long, we will appreciate anew how much we depend upon one another for our own flourishing. Maybe not getting to be the church is exactly what the church needs to awaken the sense of longing and desire that will propel us back into communities of faith that feed us in ways we didn't even know we needed, communities that possess a more capacious spirit and a more generous sense of mission.

So long as this virus remains so wildly out of control we are stuck in a state of holy longing. We're frozen, like those two hands in Rodin's *The Cathedral*. Those hands *want* to hold each other, they *want* to come together, but they can't. To be sure, God does not need people to gather in order for God to be active and present in our lives. But God is not the church. The church is other people. That is the essence of the incarnational reality we proclaim: that God was made flesh, and that the work of the Holy Spirit that dwells in each of us is activated and multiplied exponentially when we gather together. For it is only together that we can fully engage in the higher calling to which we have been called – to build up, nurture, and grow communities of faith and show the world what it means to live by the law of love; to shine as a beacon of hope for what our world yet can be. That remains our calling even if we cannot fully live it. For now, and until we are free to be communities in Christ, we must be stretched out in preparation for an even fuller future than we could have imagined before we had to close our doors. That is my holy hope, born from this time of waiting. A hope that allows me to say, with Augustine, "Let us desire, therefore, my brethren, for we shall be filled."

### Assuring the Upkeep of Our Parish

**For the moment there will be no Church Collections at any of our masses. However, we have place donation boxes in the church for anybody who wishes to make a contribution to the upkeep of our parish. We are complete reliant on your generosity for this.**

THANK YOU

### Parish Life

**All masses have now resumed as normal**

**Weekdays 10am, 12.40**

**Rosary after 10am Mass**

**Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament**

**Wednesday 10.30-12.40**

**Sundays**

**Saturday Night Vigil Mass 6pm, Sunday 9.30am,**

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