

Be Present with One Another

April 14, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, God with us. Amen.

Once, I was in the park near my house, and I saw women walking in from all four directions towards the middle of the park. They had things like windbreakers and golf visors, some had travel mugs, they were all carrying folding lawn chairs. When they got to the middle of the park, they all set up their folding chairs in a circle, and began visiting.

Another day, I saw two car loads of people at the Dairy Queen. They each went to the drive through separately and parked beside one another and rolled down their windows and ate in their cars side by side.

One Christmas morning, my mother drove up to our house and we all stood on the boulevard in the snow, opening our stockings instead of going to church.

I heard there was a time here at McClure that you came and sat in the parking lot together every week instead of here in the worship centre.

We all recognize these scenarios now as - *pandemic behaviours*, right? In 2020 and 2021, there were protocols in place about how close we should *physically* be to one another, and we tried to say that we did not *need* to be physically close to one another. We tried to believe that we could be *physically* distant but still *socially* close. Physically distant, spiritually close. Physically distant, emotionally close. We hoped that even if we were not physically close to one another, we could still feel love, value, and community. We made incredible efforts to connect to one another digitally on video, by email, by phone - all the non-physical ways you can imagine. We wanted to say- we don't *need* to be physically close, to be close. But it was hard.

The pandemic taught us that we can *survive* when we are physically isolated but we need the physical presence of others, especially our loved ones, to *thrive*.

Multiple studies can now be found that show physical distancing, remote working, and physical isolation caused loneliness. The American Psychological association found that the pandemic increased loneliness all over the world. A study from the national library of medicine found that : *“The combination of hazardous health conditions, extensive changes to people’s daily routines due to lockdowns, social restrictions, and employment uncertainty, have led to mental health challenges, reduced levels of subjective wellbeing, and increased maladaptive behaviors and emotional distress.”*

We must have known this in our hearts, and in our souls and in our bodies, because we were very creative about finding ways to get as close to one another physically as we possibly could. We spent an awful lot of time in parking lots.

The deep truth about the importance and value of physical presence permeates our ancient faith stories. For us, God is not just a floating spirit that we can't see but is embodied physically. In the first stories that we have in the book of Genesis, the *breath* of God is over the water. We read that God is *walking* in the garden of Eden. When God talks to Moses it's in a way that can be seen and felt physically- in the burning bush. At Christmas, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus we sing – O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Emmanuel means *God is with us*. The birth of Jesus means, God is *physically* with us. In the person of Jesus, we are given an opportunity to experience the presence of God in a new way, as if we had been talking to God on the phone, but in Jesus – God pulled out a lawn chair and sat across from us.

At Easter time after Jesus' death and resurrection, the early stories are all about Jesus appearing to the disciples in body, as if to say I'm still here, I'm still close to you. I'm still *present*. Don't forget what it's like to have me present. Remember in last week's gospel Jesus invited Thomas to actually touch his side where he had been injured- on his body. In today's gospel – even though the disciples think Jesus might be a ghost- Jesus eats some broiled fish – as if to say- really- I'm here.

Our faith does not ask us to separate body and soul. We are not required to have a relationship with God over Zoom but to experience the presence of God physically close to us, physically present with us, in creation and in the person of Jesus.

You might say – yeah but Emily – we're not like the first disciples, we can't eat fish sticks with Jesus not even in the parking lot of Gibson's. How can we experience the real presence of Christ now? In our lives?

In the church, our ancestors have given quite a bit of thought to this question. Over the next couple of weeks, we'll read more about the risen Jesus and his presence in body with those who loved him, then we'll read the story of the ascension- when Jesus' body will go back to God. Then we'll read the story of Pentecost- when the Spirit of God will come down again, to be embodied, this time to fill up the hearts and minds of the people of the early church.

Pentecost is when the Spirit of God becomes present in the people of the church. The church becomes the physical body of Christ. The physical body of Christ- is alive and well here this morning, look around, here, or in Radville, or in Carlyle. You will see and feel the real presence of Christ because we are present here this morning with one another.

Part of our Christian life, is having faith in God, the creator, praying to the one up above or out there somewhere, believing that God cares, and can hear us, can help us with everything beyond our control or understanding.

Part of our faith is studying and learning about our ancestors, learning our songs, and our traditions, *And with that stuff we can survive as Christians*. As my grandfather used to say- I can pray to God at home.

We can survive. But to thrive is to feel the real and present love of God mentally, spiritually, emotionally AND physically. Because we understand the Spirit of God is present now in the church, and because we understand that the church is people, then the very best way to feel that God is present with us, and to be present with God. is to be present with one another.

Our faith is in a God who is fully embodied and because of that, as followers, we are obligated to be with others: To care for others, To hear others, To be challenged by others, and to encounter the real and living presence of the risen Christ, in the *people* around us. Christianity is more than a philosophy. It's a way of life that requires our physical presence with and for the people in our lives. It's visiting one another, it's helping people move, it's reading to kids, baking and eating together. Christianity is more than a spiritual practice, it is having concern for the physical wellbeing of others: Those in prison, Those who are sick, Those who are unhoused, Those who are in danger. Christianity is showing up for the ones we love and the ones God loves. Because in this way we come face to face with the real presence of the living God.

Theresa of Avila is a Spanish Mystic and nun from the 1500s, and I'm going to read a poem that was attributed to her. It is so beautiful that we have included a hymn with these words in our own More Voices hymn book. She writes about the physical presence of Christ in our community:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

Amen.

Rev. Emily Carr

<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2022/05/covid-19-increase-loneliness>