

## Being the Church: Gathered or Scattered

The psalmist cried, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear...” (Psalm 46:1). And yet we are afraid—anxious and worried. We are all in new territory as we experience together the worldwide impact of the new coronavirus COVID-19, and fear is both rational and expected. It’s surreal and exhausting to consider what is unfolding all around us. Who is fully prepared for something like this? Dorothy and I never thought we would ever minister through a pandemic. I can’t believe I’m even writing out these words, trying to offer something during a time such as this.

There are a lot of unknowns. A lot of questions. Much will be written about this one day. We will learn much about ourselves and the world as we weather this storm. Some of it will be good and some of it not so good. But that’s for tomorrow.

Today, in the meantime, we can be present, in the here and now. Today we can affirm what we know to be true. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” We can throw ourselves into the arms of God and find in God a refuge and strength greater than anything we can provide or harness from within ourselves.

And today we can affirm the presence of God in the here and now. To search for God’s peace in the midst of the storm. “Peace I leave with you;” Jesus said, “my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27). I know. Our hearts are troubled. But this might be a call for us to go deeper than the fears to discover that peace.

And some of that peace comes from knowing that we’re not alone. Even during this season of prolonged social isolation and self-distancing we need to remember—again and again—that we’re not alone. We’re never truly alone. We will need to say this to ourselves and say to one another that we’re not alone—especially those who are most vulnerable and scared. We’re going to have to draw strength from each other. We will need to remind one another that we are being held by a love that will never let us go, through the storm, through the fears, and all our anxieties we are being held.

Now is the time to remember that we are the body of Christ. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12). We are connected one to another through the Spirit, bound together by love and grace. When one rejoices, we all rejoice together; when one suffers, we all suffer together (1 Corinthians 12:26). We might be suspending worship and other activities in the church building for a season, but this does not mean we’re stopping the work of the church—it doesn’t stop us from *being* the church for one another. Wherever we are, whether together or apart, we are the body of Christ. In Saturday’s *New York Times*, Dr. Esau McCaulley made a similar point in his piece [The Christian Response to the Coronavirus: Stay Home](#), “The church’s absence, it’s literal emptying, can function as a symbol of its trust in God’s ability to meet us regardless of the location. The church remains the church whether gathered or scattered. It might also indirectly remind us of the gift of gathering that we too often take for granted.” Through acts

of kindness, patience, and compassion we will be the church God has called us and equipped us—and now needs us— to be, for one another and for the larger community.

It's been remarkable to see so many online communities forming as we self-isolate, communities offering valuable correct information, sources of support and encouragement. This is especially true in the faith community. There is a new Facebook page called *The Common Good*. Anyone can join it, but it's designed as a support community for faith leaders. It's a unique gathering of folks sharing personal experience, concerns, questions, fears, wisdom, and all kinds of resources from our respective traditions.

This meditation from the Jewish tradition was very meaningful to me this week. It's a "kavanah" or intention, "A Kavanah (Intention) for Washing Hands" written by Rabbi Abigail Treu:

"In Jewish tradition, every action is an opportunity for mindfulness and gratitude. One spiritual practice is to aim to recite 100 blessings a day, a way of creating a through-line of mindfulness and gratitude as the day unfolds. Among the moments for blessing in this tradition is upon washing hands. Some recite this blessing every morning as part of their morning washing up routine; others when they wash hands before or after meals.

As we place renewed focus on this simple act, the following kavanah – intention – can become a moment of mindfulness and gratitude.

Before washing hands or sanitizing, take a moment to pause and recognize what you're doing: you're about to clean your hands. Whisper to yourself:

*Thank you for water and soap and sanitizer.*

*Thank you for hands.*

*Thank you for everyone who made it possible for me to be clean right now – the people who made soap and sanitizer and sinks and towels and plumbing and this space and facilities and for the human project of medicine and health and hygiene.*

*Thank you for my health and the ability to care for others in this moment.*

As you clean your hands, look at them. Feel your hands, see your skin, your nails. Take this moment to pause and breathe. Feel what cleansing feels like right now.

Smile. If there is a mirror, look into your own eyes and smile to yourself.

Recite the traditional blessing for washing hands, or one of your own creation. The traditional blessing is:

*Barukh atah Adonai, eloheynu melekh ha-olam,  
asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al netilat yadaim.*

Blessed are you, Source of Life,  
who makes us holy through these actions including this washing of the hands."

And this very moving poem, written last week on March 11, by the Rev. Lyn Ungar, has been all over the internet:

## **Pandemic**

*What if you thought of it  
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—  
the most sacred of times?  
Cease from travel.  
Cease from buying and selling.  
Give up, just for now,  
on trying to make the world  
different than it is.  
Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.  
Center down.*

*And when your body has become still,  
reach out with your heart.  
Know that we are connected  
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.  
(You could hardly deny it now.)  
Know that our lives  
are in one another's hands.  
(Surely, that has come clear.)  
Do not reach out your hands.  
Reach out your heart.  
Reach out your words.  
Reach out all the tendrils  
of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.*

*Promise this world your love—  
for better or for worse,  
in sickness and in health,  
so long as we all shall live.*

May it be so.

~ ~ ~ ~

I offer this beautiful prayer written by Jill Duffield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*.  
Let us pray:

*God of all that is seen and unseen, our anxiety rises as the invisible coronavirus spreads. We worry about the impact of this illness on healthcare workers, older adults, those already physically fragile, the vulnerable among us and people whose livelihoods are tied to the regular movement of people and commerce. We recognize in this moment how inextricably connected we*

*are to one another and we hope that this unmistakable realization will shape all our actions in ways that foster the common good, increase compassion and expand communal care. As people in positions of leadership in religious communities, educational institutions, hospitals, government and local communities face difficult choices about how to address the complex challenges this virus brings, grant them wisdom and courage. Knowing that we are flawed and that our knowledge is incomplete, make us humble in our judgment, patient with one another, and gracious toward those tasked with the burden of making hard decisions in the days ahead. Bring healing to the sick, strength to the caregivers, comfort to those who mourn, peace to those in quarantine and mercy to all of your beloved creation. Amen.*