

Peter W. Marty Epistle

Dear Michael,

It has been on my mind to write you about a matter that I know has you feeling trapped. For the first time since I've known you, I'm beginning to wonder how you're going to sustain your joy in ministry for the long haul and keep all that delight that drove you to sign your life and weekends over to this crazy profession in the first place.

I've thought a lot about your congregation's situation and the leadership bind I think you find yourself in. I keep discovering churches that share many of your identical circumstances, not that that provides any special comfort. But now, in the confidence and trust of our friendship, I hope you'll receive some candid words from me about your predicament. I only want for your congregation to flourish and your ministry to be long. So, ponder these musings of mine in that good theological head of yours and see if they don't make some sense to you. I'd rather share and discuss them in person, of course, which beats setting their clumsy inexactness into the hardening concrete of a letter. But we don't have the privilege of being together right now. So, bear with me until I get that chance to adjust my words over a cup of coffee with you.

In a word, I fear that you and your congregation took the wrong lesson from the COVID pandemic. Yes, it was a crushing time for all of us. But you and so many peers of yours were sold a bad bill of goods. The gods of technology, which operated with near total sovereignty when all of us were in lockdown, seduced your people. They took advantage of the moment. Those gods knew of our human susceptibility to the attractive nature of all things technological, and they exploited that vulnerability. For us in the church, they successfully confused community with communication, and platform with presence. Now, unfortunately, you and others are paying the price.

During the pandemic, you wisely did what we all were forced to do: you broadcast your Sunday worship. From everything I saw, I think you and your people did an outstanding job. Somebody learned videography adeptly. You assembled a meaningful worship service that reached people beyond your membership. Your folks quickly mastered Zoom.

If a mistake was made, however, I believe it involved using all of that pandemic down time to let your imagination run wild toward a bigger investment in fancy video equipment and an expansion of your staff and volunteers to accommodate an anticipated future in digital circles. Now, as I mentioned earlier, I think you're feeling trapped. Like other churches you know, your sanctuary worship attendance feels anemic to you. You're left to guess at the number of online attendees each week, hoping that sharing those guesstimates will bolster the spirit of what must feel like a dwindling congregation. Weekly, you ponder the state of mind of those who worship online. Are they in their pajamas making pancakes as they watch? Are they exceeding the six-minute average viewing time that most online worshipers practice? They surely can't be singing along with the songs. So, what you have is a dilemma on your hands. You know that

you'd have an instant uprising, and a smaller congregation to show for it, if you eliminate the livestream service option.

So, let's return to what I think you're really good at, Michael, and who you're supposed to be as a pastor. You built and nurtured this marvelous congregation of wonderfully different people who embody love. That's what they are – a community of embodied love. A strange menagerie of people, for sure, but nothing less than what the kingdom of God is supposed to look like. These folks care for each other in profound ways. I've seen it myself. You've taught them how to live by a better hope than that with which the world lives. They understand hospitality in lovely, non-confining ways. They seem to grasp the complexity, subtlety, and richness that accompany relationships of deep meaning. And you understand as well as anyone the significance of Christian community, that we need each other to be fully human and to know Christ.

In light of all this, however, I have to ask you: What is there to gain by disembodied worship? Why would you use a disembodied medium to practice the love of an embodied God? Here is this precious community of embodied love and you've chosen to mediate it. A mediated relationship, which is what digital worship constitutes, will always come up short. It's lopsided. It lacks mutuality. Somebody speaks or somebody sings in a worship space, while everybody else outside of that space passively observes those somebodies through a half million pixels.

Remember what you accomplished when you redesigned your sanctuary years ago? You took out the communion rail because you didn't like the way it separated clergy and people. "We're all one," you used to say. "All precious servants of the Lord." Very intentionally then, you collapsed the gap between pastor and pew and you took out that communion rail, which, at the time, you referred to as "that fence." Well, you've now erected a new fence. You've put a computer screen or TV monitor between the weekly vibrancy inside your sanctuary and all those people making pancakes back at home. That doesn't make any sense. It's more disembodied than I think you realize.

I should also add that I think there are few viewing experiences less titillating than watching mainline Protestant worship on a screen. That's simply the truth. It's no surprise that people break out the pancake batter. There's a lot of down time and lack of human drama in a livestream. No tingling of the spine through a majestic hymn. No gurgling infant beside you or frail octogenarian who gave his all just to make it to church. All of the electricity and energy that can accompany actual worshippers surrounding you – it's just absent.

Those gods of technology I spoke about didn't just seduce your people; they deceived pastors as well. They caused good souls like you to fork over treasures of your character without you even realizing it. Facets of your pastoral humility, wise judgment, and solid common sense got melted down and formed into what looks to me like a platform. A flimsy but nevertheless gold-in-appearance platform. Those gods fooled so many clergy into believing they could dramatically expand their online platform, thereby saving larger chunks of humanity in the process. But unless our job is to save the whole world, which I am not convinced it is, given my confidence in a savior, why are we so obsessed with the size of our platform? Why would we

worship at that altar when we've been given the gift of pastoral presence and proximity. Sure, some pastors are called to the responsibility of building and sustaining large online platforms. But most of us get the privilege of creating and fostering delicate human community where different types of people gather physically to share joys and sorrows through emotional engagement with one another.

The scriptures tell us over and over again, "Jesus drew near to the people." That's proximity and presence. And you know as well as I do that indescribable grace that emanates from people of faith who gather together in a common space to center their lives in Christ. An alchemy, really. Let's not forget: We were born looking for a face, and ideally one full of love. We didn't come out of the womb looking for a screen.

The Christian faith is built on corporeal events. There's a reason the doctrine of incarnation centers our existence. God in Christ chose to be revealed in the physical realm. Read Dietrich Bonhoeffer in this regard. He was convinced that the gathered church alone is how the risen Christ has chosen to take up residence. According to Bonhoeffer, one cannot know Christ apart from rich Christian community. We may study and learn all we want about Jesus of Nazareth. But we cannot know the risen Christ except when gathered together.

We are the bodies who bring the spirit of this God to life when we gather. And, it's beautiful. When people argue that video livestreaming reaches all sorts of homebound individuals otherwise unserved by the church, I want to say, "Wait a minute! Why settle for such a diminished substitute? Why wouldn't you do everything in your power to beef up teams of volunteers who will visit these people and bring communion? Or, expend more of yourself in this important way, depending on the size of the need. This face-to-face idea of community is the historic strength and firepower of the church." If people in care centers are visited by others who care about them, they'll never forget that attention paid, no matter how occasional it happens. Never. And if you want to create a low-budget podcast to share sermons with them, great. At least audio recordings don't masquerade with the same illusion of real community that video streaming does. (There's a reason why that video way of relating is called *virtual*.)

There's one more thing I want to mention. It's another item on that bad bill of goods the pandemic sold us. You've been led to believe, I can almost bet, that the beauty of online worship is its convenience. It meets people where they're at. But since when is worship supposed to be organized around convenience, as if convenience is some unalloyed good? Church is inconvenient. Period. We sing songs we didn't pick, hear scriptures we didn't choose, commit to endeavors for which we must sacrifice, and – here's the worst – sit next to people who aren't even our closest friends.

Technology gives us the sense that we're all free agents unconnected from any demands of a community to which we're accountable. Turning a screen on or off gives one an automatic sense of control. I decide what's valuable to me and what I want. But faith tells me that my life is more than a bundle of impulses to be gratified. I know I can customize most of my life by just putting two thumbs to a cellphone. But church pulls me away from that self-designed and mostly

self-interested life and reminds me that there is emotional work in being present to other people. Church may be inconvenient – yes! – especially in the minds of those who aren't sure if God has anything better to offer their already evident happiness and health. But for those interested in more than convenience, the embodied variety of a Christ-centered community, where we get to be accepted for who we are and loved into the people we get to become, is unmatched goodness.

Thanks for allowing me to speak my mind. The next time we're together, perhaps we can discuss some leadership moves you might make to counter these small "g" gods of technology. I hope I haven't disinterested you in that project.

Yours truly,

Peter W. Marty