

Devotion: November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020

This past Sunday marked the 8-month anniversary (if that is right word to use) since we shifted our worship experience from in-person to online. I know I for one had really hoped that that shift would be much more temporary than it has been, but I do not want to spend this time and this devotion in lament, rather I wanted to share with you some of what I have learned about us and the church in this time. In the early days of the pandemic I had regular phone calls with colleagues of mine to discuss a number of important details about online worship; namely what programs to use, what equipment would be helpful, how to deal with situations like hospital visits, funerals and weddings. From those phone calls one of colleagues said something to me that has stuck with me since, his comment was this, "We cannot be authentic as a church online; without in person meetings and worship we become little more than watching a performance on TV."

That has stuck with me, because over the last eight months my experience has shown me something much different. Sure, I will agree that I miss the gathering, singing, baked goods and coffee, but our authenticity as people of faith has remained and I would argue has grown. For example, I have had more emails and phone calls in the last eight months from people within our communities and beyond that have begun with the words, "(Someone's name ) had shared with me that the churches have online services and that they are really meaningful; I was wondering if we could join in on Sunday morning?" For those of you who cannot think of the word that is used to describe what has led to a statement like that occurring, let me help you. The word you are looking for is evangelism. This has been my first learning that people are much more willing to share their "church," with others when it is online, and people are much more willing to give it a try. Evangelism at its root is all about welcoming, not forcing, not telling people what to believe, but welcoming them to see for themselves, which is exactly what has happened.

Another lesson I have learned is that we have all become much more attentive to regularly connecting with one another and particularly making sure that we connect in time of challenge, grief and crises. For example, not that long ago I was asked to officiate at a small graveside service and at that service I began with the words, "Please know that even though our provincial regulations and guidelines have limited the amount of people that are able to present here today, that standing with us in Spirit and in prayer is our entire family of faith and wider community." After the service was over one of the family members replied to me, "When you said those words I believed them, for I have so many calls and cards from my church family that I know they are here." Now, I am not saying that that didn't happen before the pandemic, but during the pandemic we have all become much more attentive to reaching out and connecting in the ways that we can, rather than leaving it to a time when you might connect in person and catch up.

Another lesson I have learned is that peoples creativity is in full bloom. Everything that you will see in the coming seasons is because of the creativity and working together in a time when we could not do things as "normal." Rather we have begun to explore what we can do and how we can do it well. The Sunday school pageant is perfect example of this. In July I had three people say to me, "Well I guess we won't have a pageant this year?" My response was to say, "Why not? Sure, we cannot be together, but

why can we not find a different way?" And we have. It will not be the same as it was in the church, but it is still be *of* the church and will have tremendous meaning and significance. The same can be said for all our "normal" services throughout Advent and Christmas, they will be different, but different is not bad. This time has allowed the creative juices of minds and hearts to flow and what has developed is incredible and is good.

Lastly, this unexpected shift to online has opened our doors wider than they ever could have opened and has made us realize just how dividing the walls of our buildings can be. That is not to say that the buildings do not matter, they do. Yet, it is wonderful to see and hear voices in worship of congregation members who were not able to physically attend worship every Sunday, but now are. It is wonderful and good that so many new faces and voices have sought us out and joined us in worship and attend every single Sunday. It is wonderful and good to learn that when we use the words a family of faith, it moves beyond the boundaries and norms that we could have ever imagined. On top of that, if the time ever comes again where we are needing to be a community and a family of faith outside the normal practise of what we have all learned it means to be as a church, we will do so quite easily and knowing that our faith does not rely on sitting in a pew.

That is just the tip of the iceberg of what I have learned. I want to go back to that statement made by colleague of mine in the early days of this pandemic. "We cannot be authentic as a church online; without in person meetings and worship we become nothing more than simply watching a performance on TV." I disagree with that statement with all my heart, mind, and soul. I disagree because this time has shown me that in fact, I think we are more authentic then we have ever been. This collective experience has shown us just how important connection is. It has shown us just how important our family of faith is. It has shown us just how important is to know that God is always with us. There will come a time when we will enter back into our "normal" ways of doing things, however I hope that when that day comes, we do not ignore the lessons we have learned. I hope and pray that we continue to be creative, evangelical, authentic, and compassionate. I hope that we can finally move beyond the words, "Well that is how we have always done it," and rather enter into the promise of the words, "What new way can we see to move forward now!"

Blessings to you all,

Sincerely,

Rev. Adam Hall