

**“23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”**

Throughout these many months of lockdown, restrictions and fears, in the midst of much AB-normality, we have also come, in a way, to get, at least a little bit, used to a new normal.

Before, we could not have imagined before a world in which we were only allowed to meet with one other person, or one other household, or even three other households. I had not thought to imagine a world where touch was discouraged, coming close to one another dangerous...

Certainly, I had not imagined what Peace Church might look like if we could not do so many of the things that make us, *us*

No singing, no hugging or passing the peace, no Eucharist, few kids running around touching and playing with everything in sight, no rice or coffee shared in a packed fellowship hall after church...

But then, under thoughtful, brave leadership, SO many people who have brought their unique gifts and ideas and so much love and resilience to this past year and a half

Hundreds upon hundreds of packages have been mailed, new worship formats and ideas have been created, tried and tested; people have made music beautiful, made worship meaningful, in spite of limitations; so many calls have been made to check in with people and resources have been shared; handmade cards and muffins in hygienic bags; the PEACE CAST with so many thoughtful contributions of all kinds; the online service in which each and every prayer request pinned on this board and more are prayed for by loving brothers and sisters; the Christmas services and video; the beautiful celebration Pentecost was in spite of everything; the books compiling meditations from many people, some of who had never shared in this way before, new liturgies and liturgical elements... I could go on and on, and I am speaking to the choir anyways: it is *you* who have done it, who have made church happen and made COMMUNITY happen in a completely strange and unprecedented situation.

I just wanted to talk about this today, because as I was reflecting on community in life today, I felt nearly moved to tears with gratitude thinking about all of this.

As much work and effort —through frustration and ever-changing policies and situations — was put into doing things safely, as many things as it meant *sacrificing* — and don't get me wrong, I've missed some of those things profoundly — *but* nevertheless, this space remained, in many different formats, and for many of us it was one of the only spaces that remained a consistent source of gathering, of community, of spiritual renewal. Peace Church remained a set apart, beautiful, holy space and time amidst a crazy world and crazy year-plus.

I am saying all of this, because, as I was reflecting on the word community, I asked myself:

***what has COVID and all that it has brought with it, taught me about the meaning of community and concept and experience of gathering?***

We are so lucky and privileged here in Germany that enough people are starting to have access to the vaccine that we are seeing infection and death rates dropping, and life slowly but surely starting to look more 'normal' again for the time being...

With that comes so much to celebrate and sort of this feeling of a collective sigh of relief... And at the same time, there are other things which we aren't used to anymore: traffic jams, and commuting to work for some people, suddenly invitations to social events or plans for travel, etc. and realizing, maybe some of us have gotten used to a different pace than we had pre-lockdown, etc..

I have seen a lot of people reflecting on this: what aspects of our old 'normal' do we want to return to, and what could, perhaps, be permanently left behind?

what new things have we learned that we could incorporate as we rebuild a less-corona-dominated life?

As we gradually are allowed to *gather* again, and to participate more in community in physical, rather than digital, formats, what do we want that to look like?

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I feel I have learned a lot from the creative community that emerged from Peace Church, and want to talk about this Sunday evening service for a few moments, specifically

A great deal of thoughtfulness was put into this gathering: it is something special; something that could only have emerged in this specific community, and in the particular circumstance that we found ourselves - with its unique limitations and opportunities ..

Those who planned this service thought about the unique time we are in: what are ways we can participate in communal worship without being able to eat bread and drink juice like we normally would for Communion?

lighting candles are a way we can do that

What are ways we can enjoy worshipful music together without being able to have a choir, or hymn books, or for awhile there, not even being able to sing?

What are words that fit this time, this space, these people, our image of God, the kind of prayers and encouragement we want to take in to the week with us, etc...?

These are just some of the thoughts that go into creating a meaningful liturgy.

This let me to reflect more generally on the meaning of *liturgy*

The dictionary defines the word liturgy, in the religious sense, as a 'form for public worship.'

The word 'form' stood out to me here.

I thought about the word 'Backform', in German — a baking dish that gives the shape to your bread, muffins, quiche or whatnot

Or the word Platform — whether it be physical or digital — as a place where things are shared, where people meet...

The *form* in both of these senses, is necessary for the good stuff to occur...

The form isn't the *point*, but it is what makes possible whatever magic will occur in or on that form...

It creates the space

When planning a liturgy for a church service there are a range of things that are the 'intended outcome' or the hopes for might emerge if the space is created

- we hope for *encounter with God*.. perhaps through worship, prayer or sacraments
- we hope for a space to worship, maybe lament, maybe praise
- we hope to hear and be changed by the Word of God
- we hope to experience fellowship with others, seeking similar things,
- and more...

The liturgy is created in hopes of facilitating at least some of these things... These goals are how choices about music, rhythms, space, words, images, allotment of time are made

Every church service, whether it considers itself 'liturgical' or not, has a liturgy...

Part of what led me to reflect on these things is a book I am reading with some friends, by Priya Parker, called, *The Art of Gathering*. It isn't about church or written about the Christian life. Actually, it is a book by a professional facilitator and mediator on how to create meaningful gatherings.

She recommends asking yourself, 'what is the purpose of this gathering?' — whether that gathering be a board meeting, a wedding, a book club, a baby shower, a funeral, a birthday party, a networking event, a dinner party... really any time people are *gathered*.'

We, as humans, have a general understanding that we need other humans; it comes naturally to us to herd or gather. That being said, sometimes we fall into patterns in which we gather in certain ways simply because that is how we have always done it, or how other people do it, or it how it is traditionally done. There can be really meaningful aspects to these traditions; but then again, sometimes they have lost their meaning or potency somewhere along the way.

On the other hand, sometimes we *fail* to gather when and how we really need to — because there is not an existing form for it, or it feels to vulnerable, or we are afraid to impose on other people.

Priya Parker says the *purpose* of a gathering should be more than just a category: if it is a book study, the purpose should not just be ‘to study a book’, if it is a family reunion, not just to ‘reunite family’.. those are categories, not purposes..

It occurred to me, in different language, Priya Parker is talking about *liturgy*, what I’d like to call the ‘*liturgies of our lives.*’

Our lives are *made up* of rituals, whether we are conscious to them or not. And those rituals, or forms, define what is possible, what even *can* come to be in our day, our family, our gathering.

As my focus today is on gathering in community,

the question I’m posing is:

what is the liturgy of your gathering?

Of course it probably won’t be as detailed as a church liturgy, but it still merits some thought, as we spend so much of our lives gathering, and the relationships that these create space to build and sustain are so crucial to our well-being, learning, service in the world, and so on...

Priya Parker is talking about creating the *forms* for the \*magic\* to happen: the creativity, the community, the connection, the celebration... whatever the goal is.

This means digging deeper — then deeper still — about why we are meeting, what we hope to result to be.

Then she says, you should “use Purpose as your bouncer” and eliminate the elements OR even the whole gatherings that don’t actually have a real or good purpose...

We have probably all had the experience that ...- maybe after days or weeks in the apartment during lockdown, when you felt so weighed down by overwhelm and discouragement — sometimes that walk with a friend, that church service, that Zoom book club... was exactly what you needed. It brought new buoyancy to your life, new hope, new perspective, it gave you the gift of energy to go back to your day-to-day as a better version of yourself.

I think everyone also knows the experience where the opposite happens,.. the gathering leaves you depleted and unchanged, or no better for it.

Of course giving, serving, even if it is exhausting, is part of the Christian call, but that is not really what I am talking about - I am talking about gathering with the hope of community and connection and encouragement and betterment, and leaving disillusioned

For those here who are planners to begin with... the point here is not planning something to death, or trying to control all our encounters and relationships

No, the point is to leave the old entrapments of what we perceive as normal ... to not simply jump back into social life, as things open up again. without reflecting on our whys.. Maybe sometimes less is more here. Less, with purpose... goes further than a lot, without reflection.

There are different purposes for different gatherings, just as different liturgies are planned for different circumstances or parts of the church year.

Nevertheless, I think Hebrews 10:23-25 is a great start in orienting ourselves on the purpose for gathering ...

in what we hope for from community

It talks about meeting to **encourage one another, and to stir each other up to love and good deeds**

some English translations also say 'provoke'... or 'spur one another on to' ... 'motivate one another to'...

I like the phrase 'stir one another up' to love and good deeds because of how captures the way in which motivating another to love, to be his or her best selves and do good in the world...

Is not just a matter of using words, but of many things: sometimes just listening, showing the person you are there and you care, sometimes reminding the person of all the beauty you see in him or her, being a sounding board, or just someone they can be honest with, relax with, reflect with, learn with...

And as Christians, we gather to **remind one another of the hope we have: Hope that He who promises is faithful.**

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In conclusion, I just wanted to share these thoughts with you, and questions I am posing to myself as well, as together we find ourselves in yet another point of transition: It is an opportunity for being thoughtful and creative.

How are we learning from this time? I've shared some things I have learned from what community looked like throughout lockdown, what I've learned from liturgies and life here in Peace Church

And I want to to encourages us take some of those learnings, as well as Hebrews 10:24-25 into our lives as we think about they ways we gather, as we try to bring thoughtfulness into building the forms in which our lives occur, and as we reflect on the liturgies of our lives.

Thank you.

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