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Dear Friends

Welcome to worship for Sunday, October 4.

It seems that the question I get asked more than any other, from people in the church but also from friends and neighbours I meet who have nothing to do with the church is, have you returned to worship. I want to say strongly that we have never stopping worshipping (as the link above demonstrates), but I know what they mean.

For the record, my position, and that of our Church Council, has been that so long as the current pandemic restrictions are in place we will not resume regular Sunday morning worship services. Even before we entered Code Orange last weekend (asking gatherings to be limited to 10 people), those restrictions were significant. The essential considerations were that our large sanctuary would be limited to 50 people, all sitting 6 feet apart, wearing masks, in a service with no singing and next to no fellowship. Additionally we would require sanitizing procedures, a traffic flow plan, a washroom strategy, pre-registration to limit the number attending, and so forth. For a congregation our size the challenge would be significant.

I'm not saying it's not possible. Other churches are trying with varying degrees of success. Some have started and stopped. Some are using the separate rooms method. Our Roman Catholic friends have re-instituted mass in several locations. It is important to remember the centrality of the Eucharist in Catholic spirituality but even saying that, the local Archbishop has issued a special dispensation. In other words, he has said you don't need to come to church to remain in good standing during the pandemic.

Though the practical considerations are significant, I have been thinking more lately about the spiritual and theological considerations of returning to worship. Why do we worship? What does it matter if we gather in the same room at the same time and do many of the same things? Can we be the church separately, virtually, individually and independently?

I don't think so.

I have a certain bias to be true. I have always gone to church. I enjoy going to church. I like experiencing different churches though they often seem less to me than my own. And I have spent my life encouraging other people to go to church and trying to the best of my ability to make going to church a meaningful and purposeful experience. I know, better than most, that church can be less-than-inspiring and more-than-disappointing at times. Whenever I am approached by someone who is interested in coming to our church, I almost plead with them to come more than once before making a decision. You don't know, you can't know, what we are about by a single visit.

But if you go regularly to church. If you get a sense of the pattern of a church. If you become familiar with a few faces, a few names. If you give a church a chance to welcome you into a community's life. If you do these things then sometimes amazing things will happen. I like to say that it is only because I have been a regular worshipper, and endured more forgettable Sundays than I can remember, that I have been able to place myself in unforgettable and transformative moments.

If I were not a regular worshipper, I would never have been visiting an African-American church in Chicago when the person beside me asked if she could pray for me. If I were not a regular worshipper I would not have recognized the sound of a congregation in song on a far off hilltop one Sunday in Lesotho. If I were not a regular worshipper I would not have been singing when that one hymn reduced me to tears. If I were not a regular worshipper I would not experience the time the preacher brought God's word as if to me alone. And if I were not a regular worshipper, I wouldn't know that these are exceptional moments and not ordinary ones.

We will return to church. I don't know when and I don't know exactly what it will look like. But we are hardly the first Christians to have to refrain from worshipping for a time. We will return to church. It is what God's people do. What God's people have always done.

Grace and peace,

Michael

Please enjoy our online worship and feel free to share with others. The link for sharing is: <https://youtu.be/5U5si8eAzK0>