

Most Fridays, 4:00 PM finds me on Zoom. That in itself is not groundbreaking. Lately it feels like I spend half my life on Zoom calls. But Friday at 4:00 is different. Friday at 4:00 is a standing group Zoom with four of my closest friends, all of whom are ordained clergy. I know -- it sounds pretty wild. I'm livin' on the edge.

I love the four people on that Zoom call. I *need* the four people on that Zoom call. Pastoring is a unique (and sometimes strange) way of life. Not everyone "gets" it. So there's something about walking the journey of that life with people who are walking it just like you. These four people know church. They know church people. They know church life. When we talk, there's so much that they "get" without me ever having to say it out loud. I need them.

What's more, I trust them. These four people have my back, and I have theirs. They know my best secrets and my most persistent sins... and they still like me anyway. They're the people who can call me out when I'm acting out, who can sit me down when tough love is in order, who can tell me the truth when I need to hear it. I trust them implicitly.

But I haven't seen them in person -- any of them, in person -- since at least February. (Maybe even earlier! It's hard to say... hard to remember life before COVID.) While we all live pretty far apart, by now we would've run into each a whole bunch of times -- district clergy breakfasts, committee meetings, conference training events, family get-togethers, what have you. But since most of those gatherings have been canceled, rescheduled, or made virtual, I haven't seen these friends in person for the last few months. I probably won't see them in person for the next few months, either.

Yet I still see them, almost every Friday at 4:00, thanks to the modern miracle that is Zoom. It's more than just a Zoom meeting. It's community. It's... well... church. We make "church" happen for one another, even at a distance. And honestly, church...

despite the distance, I think I'm closer to them now than I ever was before. It's amazing, how connected you can be, even at a distance.

We're talking about distance, all throughout this sermon series. Actually, we're talking about distance everywhere. Keep your distance. Maintain social distancing. Six feet of distancing. In this new COVID-tinged world, we keep encountering distance.

Yet in the scriptures, we encounter distance, too. We find story after story of a God works with distance, and works in spite of distance, and makes distance work for God's purposes. From the laws of Deuteronomy, to the healing miracles of Jesus, to the words of the parables... the scriptures abound with stories of distance. And maybe... maybe those scripture stories about a God who navigates distance can help us navigate the distance we're experiencing these days.

So today, we turn to yet another scripture marked by distance -- this time, a scripture from the writings of the apostle Paul. In the letter to the Colossian church, we read:

[Colossians 2:1-7, NRSV]

¹ For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. ² I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

⁶ As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

As I re-read these words, Paul's words... as I re-read this scripture, this ancient letter... as I re-read it in this season of social distancing, this season of covid-tide... something strikes me. A full quarter of the New Testament (including this passage) is written by the apostle Paul (or by someone who's writing in Paul's style and Paul's name, a common and totally acceptable practice in the ancient world). A full quarter of the New Testament is written by the apostle Paul. A full quarter of the New Testament consists of letters written by Paul to some of the earliest communities of Christ-followers. A full quarter of the New Testament is... letters.

I've known that for some time. They covered that bit in seminary. What newly strikes me is this (perhaps painfully obvious) realization: you don't write letters to people when you're nearby those people. You only write letters when you're at a distance. The earliest days of the church were marked by distance. Those early Christ-followers weren't necessarily distant from one another (at least not in the ways that we are these days)... but they were distant from their apostle and leader and guide. They were distant from Paul. The earliest days of the church were marked by distance. We have a full quarter of the New Testament as proof of that.

Because of that, I think Paul is in a unique position to teach us something about social distancing, and about "being church" in the face of distance. The majority of his ministry happened at a distance. Whether separated by miles, or circumstances, or even prison walls... Paul learned how to navigate distance, how to overcome distance, for the sake of Christian community.

Of course, it's not ideal. Paul knows that. He'd rather be with them -- all of them, all these faith communities he's founded -- in person. He knows how important it is for God's people to gather together, face to face. That in-person interaction encourages these followers of Jesus, helps them grow, and holds them accountable, too. He grieves

that that isn't possible. "I want you to know how much I am struggling for you," he writes to the Colossians, "and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face" (Colossians 2:1, NRSV). We hear you, Paul. We're struggling, too. There are some things that are lost when we can't be face to face.

Yet Paul also knows that all is not lost, even when we can't be face to face. And so, in his letter, he offers them something valuable, even at a distance. He offers them reassurance: *I'm still with you, even if I can't be with you!* Or, in Paul's words: "though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit" (Colossians 2:5, NRSV). He offers them encouragement: *You're doing so well! You're keeping it together! Your faith is strong, and that's an inspiration!* Or as Paul puts it: "I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ" (Colossians 2:5, NRSV). And he offers them advice: *Keep your focus on living in Christ, growing in faith, and giving thanks.* Or, in Paul's words: "continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Colossians 2:6-7, NRSV).

Even at a distance, he offers the Colossians reassurance and encouragement and advice. He does all that with a pen and some parchment (in a time when literacy wasn't exactly at its highest, and written messages took ages to reach their destination) and a messenger to deliver the good word (in a time when travel could be difficult and expensive and even dangerous). Paul offers them reassurance and encouragement and advice, with nothing but a pen and parchment and messenger at his disposal. Imagine what the man could've accomplished with a Facebook page and a Zoom account.

Which brings me to: all things COVID aside... how incredibly lucky we are to be alive right now. Yes, we live in a world of social distancing and reduced indoor capacity and increased isolation... but we also live in a world of next-day delivery and text messages and phone calls and emails and Zooms and Google Meets and Facebook

Messenger. We may be struggling in the midst of all this distance and isolation... but at the same time, we're able to reach out to one another like never before. We're able to connect with one another, instantly and reliably. Sure, I may lose sight of that on those days when I'm frustrated by how many times I had to reset the router... but deep down, I know: we've never been better positioned or better resourced to communicate over distance.

Paul wasn't so well-positioned. He wasn't so well-resourced. And yet, he was able to overcome that distance to offer words of reassurance and encouragement and advice -- words so powerful and inspired that someone thought it'd be useful to keep them around for a couple of thousand years. (Talk about overcoming distance -- not just of miles, but of millenia.) And his words didn't just help create connections with some community of faith back in his day... they've been helping God's people connect and "be church" for centuries.

So, you socially-distant church... perhaps now is the time to take a page out of Paul's book. Perhaps now is the time to take advantage of the resources and outlets we have at our disposal, to be intentional, and to offer words that will help us connect in this strange season of social distancing. Perhaps now is the time to reach out across the distance and be church for one another... to be church with our words.

Can't think of what to say? Well, as luck would have it, I have some suggestions, which I totally stole from this guy named Paul. You could offer words of reassurance. You know, something like: *I'm still with you, even if I can't be with you!* You could offer words of encouragement: *You are doing so well! You're keeping it together! Your faith is strong, and that's an inspiration!* You could offer some words of advice: *Keep your focus on living in Christ, growing in faith, and giving thanks... even now, especially now.*

Yeah, I 100% lifted all that from Paul. But it has stood the test of time. Besides... don't you need to hear all that right now? Don't you need to hear someone say: *I'm still with you! You're keeping it together! Keep on living in Christ!* Don't you need to receive that reassurance, that encouragement, that advice? If so... then perhaps it's time to offer it to one another. Perhaps that's the best way for us to "be church" for one another right now -- especially now.

There are a lot of ways to "be church," church. And only a few of them involve sipping coffee together in the atrium or sitting next to each other in a pew. So perhaps we navigate our current distance by focusing not on what we can't do, but rather on what we can offer. We can offer reassurance. We can offer encouragement. We can offer advice. We can offer all that to one another in spite of our current distance. We can be church, even across a distance.

It's what Christ has called us to do. He has called us into this one church, this one body. But like most things in this season of covid-tide, we're going to have to do things a little bit differently, a little more intentionally. Fortunately, we have God's grace and Paul's example to guide us.

So reach out, friends. If Paul taught us anything, it's that Christian community can weather a little distance. We've done it before. Let's do it again.