

The Christian Response to the Coronavirus: Stay Home

When loving your neighbor means keeping your distance.

By Esau McCaulley

Dr. McCaulley is an assistant professor at Wheaton College.

March 14, 2020

The church, the actual building that houses black bodies and souls, stands at the center of black life and culture. It is a fact hiding in plain sight that one of the first cooperative economic ventures former slaves undertook was the purchase and maintenance of churches. Without the cooperation of the church, many black colleges, universities and political organizations would not exist. To this day, American black Christians attend church at a higher rate than any other ethnic group.

It is not then surprising that when terrorists wanted to strike fear in the hearts of black believers, they burn and attack our churches. Despite the trauma, the church has remained a source of hope. The marches and sit-ins of the civil rights movement were often preceded by mass worship services.

But what happens when the church is a part of the danger?

With the novel coronavirus spreading rapidly, this is not simply a question for individual church members. The pandemic forces the church as an institution to consider its role during a time of crisis. Many religious communities are suspending their typical operations. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has stopped services worldwide. The Catholic Church in Rome shuttered its doors temporarily. Much of Washington State has done the same. What should we think about this? Are Christians abandoning their responsibility to the sick and suffering?

Some Christians may be tempted to look back on their history of remaining physically present during times of distress. Starting around 250 A.D., A.D., a plague that at its height was said to kill 5,000 people a day ravaged the Roman empire. The Christians stood out in their service to the infirm. Because they believed that God was sovereign over death, they were willing to minister to the sick even at the cost of their lives. This witness won many to the Christian cause. Should we follow their example and gather to celebrate in word and ritual, in the sermon as well as the bread and the wine?

Doctors and nurses of faith can indeed draw upon this story today to inspire them to tend to those sickened by the pandemic. What about the rest of us? This remains certain in the ever-shifting narrative of Covid-19: the most effective ways of stopping the spread of the virus is by social distancing (avoiding large gatherings) and good personal hygiene (washing our hands). The data suggests that what the world needs now is not our physical presence, but our absence.

This does not seem like the stuff of legend. What did the church do in the year of our Lord 2020 when sickness swept our land? We met in smaller groups, washed our hands and prayed. Unglamorous as this is, it may be the shape of faithfulness in our time.

There is a lesson here for a diminished church. It is not that the church should go away forever, but that heroic virtue comes in small actions as much as in large ones. We live in an age of self-assertion, where everyone is yelling, "Pay attention to me because I am the only one who can help." But part of the Christian message is that God comes

to us in ways that defy our expectations. The all-powerful empties himself of power to become a child. Jesus as king does not conquer his enemies through violence, he converts them to his cause by meeting violence with sacrificial love.

The church's absence, its literal emptying, can function as a symbol of its trust in God's ability to meet us regardless of the location. The church remains the church whether gathered or scattered. It might also indirectly remind us of the gift of gathering that we too often take for granted.

Recently, I came home from a trip out of state and my son ran to the door to greet me shouting, "Daddy, daddy!" He jumped into my arms and gave me a hug with all the strength his 5-year-old body could muster. The absence had made the return home that much sweeter. It reminded me that my life was not out there speaking to crowds and trying to impress strangers. My life was at home among friends and family. I do not know when I will be able to take the bread and wine without hesitancy with the members of my church, but when I do I hope that I match my son's joy.

My daughter came to my office nearly in tears today because the piano concert that she had been preparing for the entire year had been canceled. To comfort her, I told her that her small sacrifice and many others like it might save the lives of people she will never meet. Through our diligence we could provide elderly couples with more years to enjoy together. It could mean more Christmases and Thanksgivings in which children get to know their grandparents and hear stories of what their parents were like when they were young. Our adjustments now will allow younger people with chronic illness a chance for a full life. If we believe that all life is sacred, from conception to death, the entirety of our lives — even the last years — is of tremendous value.

Regardless of our beliefs, the one experience common to all humanity is that we die. In that we share a kinship. But Christians can, through their actions and faith, lodge their protest against this great enemy, not as a shaking of one's fist at the wind, but as testimony to the greater hope of the eventual defeat of death itself. The thing we must always struggle to discern is the proper shape of that testimony.

When I was younger, I had an aunt stay with us for a few days who was afflicted with H.I.V. I was only a child and the information was hazy and jumbled in my developing mind. I do remember vividly sitting at our dinner table eating fries with a little too much ketchup. She came and sat next to me and asked if she could have some. I was afraid. What if she had a cut on her lip and bled into the fries and I wouldn't be able to tell? Could it be spread through saliva? I was terrified, but I loved my aunt more than I feared her disease. So we ate fries together and I swallowed my terror. That hasty communion is my lasting memory of her.

During the AIDS epidemic, many churches showed their solidarity by sharing the bread and the wine with the infected to show that there was nothing to fear. Today, it may be that we show our solidarity by not sharing.

The Gospel of John recounts Jesus' words to his disciples in the upper room before his death. During this final discourse, he tells them that it is better that he goes away so that the comforter (the Holy Spirit) would come. The point is that the loss of his physical presence through his death, resurrection and ascension would lead to an even deeper communion with God. It is possible that, strangely enough, the absence of the church will be a great testimony to the presence of God in our care for our neighbors.

Esau McCaulley (@esaumccaulley) is an assistant professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and a priest in the Anglican Church in North America, where he serves as the director of the Next Generation Leadership Initiative.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.