

Well, this is week three of virtual worship. We have not been together on Sunday morning worship since March 15th, and even that day there were numbers of people absent because of concerns about Covid-19. Today is also Palm Sunday. For a long time, over 1,700 years, the Sunday before Easter has been the time when Christians commemorate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It marks the beginning of Holy Week. This week culminates on Friday, Good Friday, the most solemn day of the Christian calendar as we remember the death of the Lord Jesus. Then, two days later, next Sunday, is the highlight of the Christian year. We celebrate that the Lord is risen! He is indeed! Celebrating the resurrection of Jesus is something that Christians have done ever since, well, ever since there were Christians. The book of Acts describes the early church gathering every Sunday to worship *the crucified and risen Lord*. Ever since the council of Nicea, in the year 325, Christians have celebrated resurrection day on Easter Sunday. This is the 1st Sunday after the 1st full moon following the spring equinox. This year that date is next Sunday, April 12th. Next Sunday we will talk about *why* this resurrection of Jesus is so, so important.

Today, however, I want to focus on the experience you are having right now, "virtual worship." You are watching and listening to a sermon, songs, etc. that are "on-line" or maybe on TV. How does this compare to when we come together to worship as a congregation in one big room? **I am convinced that even though we can be grateful for these opportunities to worship remotely, sitting in your living room, we are still missing out in some ways.** I think it is important to understand why this is. So, friends, let's pause and pray the Lord would use His Word to both encourage and challenge us today.

Hebrews 10:25 – Let us not neglect to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encourage each other all the more as you see the day approaching.

Friends, that is the one verse in the Bible that explicitly instructs us to meet together. However, we know that gathering together is

what the Christians continually did in the New Testament.

Acts 2:46 – Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house.

In the early church, following Jesus was not something people did alone. They did it in community, as a spiritual family. That is why so many of the instructions or commands in the New Testament focus on how Christians are to treat each other. The thought of not meeting together with other believers was completely foreign to them. In fact, as we see in 1 Corinthians 5, one of the worst punishments for Christians in the early church was being excluded from the fellowship, not being allowed to even eat with brothers and sisters in Christ. In their way of thinking, not being able or not being allowed to gather with other believers to worship, fellowship and receive instruction from the Lord would be considered a great tragedy.

Now, I realize that many professing Christians in the 21st Century seem to have a different attitude. **Long before Covid-19 some have practiced a very private Christianity. They believe in God, read the Bible, pray and maybe even tell other people about Jesus, but they never go to church.** Maybe some have the ultimate house church made up of four members: a husband, a wife and two kids. Others are part of a local congregation, or at least they say they are, but involvement and attendance are minimal. Attending church every six weeks is considered perfectly normal. Now, I am not reprimanding or scolding anyone, at least not at this point. I am just describing what is happening, and frankly, I think we as evangelical pastors bear significant responsibility for this situation. We have often told people "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian." You have likely heard this analogy, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to the garage makes you a car." That is true. In the past, there seemed to be a lot of people who went to church, but didn't appear to be genuine believers in Jesus. It was important to warn folks that just going to church was not enough, that salvation is by grace,

through faith in Jesus Christ alone! Yes, we must always remind folks of the truth spoken in:

Ephesians 2:8, 9 – God saved you by His grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, (such as going to church) so none of us can boast about it.

I hope each of you listening understand that going to church or being a member of a church is never a substitute for genuine faith in the Lord Jesus.

However, I now phrase things a bit differently than I used to. I often say, "You can become a Christian without going to church. Becoming a Christian is all about trust in Jesus Christ, *but* you can't really be a Christian without being part of a church." What I mean is that you simply are not faithfully following Jesus if you choose not to be part of a local congregation. It is in that context that you can use your gifts to serve the Lord and your fellow believers in Christ. My point is that being a part of a church, going to church to worship the Lord, fellowshiping with other Christians, and hearing the Word of God proclaimed is the norm for believers in Jesus. It is indeed a very strange time, really tragic when we are not able to do that. Now, I am not suggesting the president or governor has made the wrong call in telling us not to meet together this morning. I'm in no position to say that. **I am simply saying that we as believers in Jesus Christ should be grieving the fact we are not able to meet together because that is what the Lord intends and instructs us to do.**

Now, maybe you are thinking, "Wow, Pastor Dan. You are kind of grouchy today! This shelter at home thing must be kind of getting to you. I think it is wonderful that I can watch and be a part of the worship service in my living room today." Well, I do, too. We should be thankful we can do this. In His providence, God has allowed this Covid-19 pandemic and all the things that surround it, including not being able to meet at church on Sundays. **As He accomplishes His purposes during this time, I believe it includes some good things for Chisholm Baptist Church.**

First, it helps us appreciate technology more and improve our abilities to use it in a way that honors the Lord.

Christians have often been skeptical of modern technology. We don't reject it, like the Amish, but we are skeptical about whether it is a good thing. Yet, folks, if it wasn't for 21st Century technology, you would not be watching this sermon right now.

It is important to realize that technology itself is neither moral nor immoral. Whether we are talking about TV, the internet, smart phones or whatever, each can be used for good purposes or evil purposes. These last few weeks with people more confined to home has meant big increases in people watching church services (usually good) and porn (always bad.) The problem is not the internet, but *how folks are using it*. Now, we should also remember that good things tend to make the best idols. When we become obsessed with technologies, when they begin to dominate our lives, then these things become destructive. Even if used for good purposes, they keep us from honoring the Lord as we should. Yet, again the problem is not technology, but how it is used. These past few weeks, I believe the Lord is enabling us to use technology to honor Him and that is a good thing.

Second, I believe God is enabling us to reach more people through these on-line worship services than we did when we were meeting together on Sunday mornings. Now, the sermons I preach have been available on the internet for quite a few years, but a lot more folks have been watching these past couple of Sundays. Many of those are people who are usually in this room on Sundays so they are used to hearing the sermon in person. However, many of you are sharing the worship services with your face book friends and other folks who just want to watch a church service during this unsettling and uncertain time. The bottom line is that during this time when we are unable to meet in this building, it seems that more people, not less, are hearing God's Word proclaimed. It reminds me of what happened when the apostle Paul was in prison. Since he was unable to travel around preaching, it seemed like that would inhibit the Gospel from being proclaimed. Yet, he writes:

Philippians 1: 12-14 – Everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Gospel. For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ. And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God’s message without fear.

Friends, throughout the Bible and throughout history, God has taken challenging circumstances and even terrible tragedies and used them to accomplish good things. Folks, I am confident He is doing so today in a wide variety of ways. Because our worship services and the services of thousands of other churches are on-line, more and more people are hearing the Gospel. With all the anxiety and confusion in our society, I hope that you and other believers in Jesus are indeed gaining confidence to boldly speak God’s message without fear. We should certainly be grateful for how the Lord is at work in the world around us.

This brings me to my third point, which is really the main point. **Although we should be grateful for how the Lord is providing for us during this time, and like the apostle Paul, we should be content in all circumstances and not complain, we should long for this time of separation to end.** Although virtual worship, on-line church, is O.K. for now, *this is not how we want it to be.* At least, we should not want it to be this way. Yes, I realize some people are part of “virtual churches,” and for the past few years, perhaps, all they have been doing is meeting with other believers on-line. Yet, folks, I am confident the Lord would say to us this morning, “When I told you to meet together, I didn’t mean you should be staring at a screen. You are supposed to be meeting with other people, not just people you see and hear, but meeting with people you can touch and smell.”

We normally gather in this building on Sunday morning to hear God’s Word and to worship, expressing our praise and adoration for the Lord. Those can be replicated to a significant degree on-line, but it is not quite the same, especially the corporate worship part. **However, there is a third reason we come together on Sunday mornings; fellowship.** Yes, face book and other interactions, including phone calls, are good

things and can be encouraging, but it is not like being together. Yes, sometimes we have to be content with social distancing, either because of a virus or because a family member lives two thousand miles away, but the in-person interactions are certainly preferred. How would you feel if a close family member, a sibling or child said, “Well, I really enjoy our phone calls and face time interactions. I have decided I am not coming for any more visits. It is much more efficient and economical to not travel.” You would say, “No, the phone calls are nice, but we want to see you in person.”

Why do we prefer face-to-face, in person interactions? Many reasons, but a big one is authenticity. On face book and even the phone, it is easy for people to pretend that they are doing O.K. when they aren’t. Now, people can pretend in person, too, but not as easily. One fellow told a friend of mine, “I don’t need to go to church any more. All I need for my sanctification is U-tube.” By that he meant all the Bible teaching resources available on the internet makes going to church unnecessary. Maybe that man will find better teaching on U-tube than he does in his church, but there is a whole other dimension of sanctification that he is missing. That dimension comes from interactions with our Christian brothers and sisters such as learning to love one another, forgive one another, comfort one another and exhort one another. These are all things one cannot learn on U-tube. Encouraging one another, as Hebrews 10:25 says we’re to do, can be done much better when we are meeting together in the same room than it can when we are watching church on-line.

“But, Pastor Dan, this is how it is right now. Church on-line is how it has to be!”

Yes, I know, and we should not complain.

We should be content and grateful, but we should not be satisfied. We should long for the time when we will be able to be together again. We are a family, a spiritual family, and it is good to feel a little bit homesick when we are separated. Folks, that is how some of you are feeling. That is one reason why you really appreciate these on-line worship services. They are a little oasis in the middle of a spiritual desert. They remind you of wonderful times of worshipping the Lord together in this room.

Folks, this feeling of being a bit homesick, of longing to be back together, for things to be like they are supposed to be, may not be really pleasant, but there is an important lesson in it. This is a feeling we as Christians should have often. We should have it, not because we aren't able to meet together in this room on Sundays, but because our true home is not in this world at all. It is in heaven. One of the important themes of the New Testament is that we are pilgrims on this earth.

1 Peter 2:11 – We are aliens and strangers.

Philippians 3:20 – Our true citizenship is in heaven.

Hebrews 11:10, 13, 16 – Abraham was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God. They did not receive the things promised: they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Folks, this is true of all of Abraham's spiritual children, both Jew and Gentile. It should also be true of us. As we live on this earth, we should be content, not complain, be grateful and enjoy all the things God has given us. We should do all we can to make this a better place to live. That is part of what loving your neighbor as yourself involves. But never forget that this isn't your home. It is a good thing to miss our true home, to be a little homesick. If this Covid-19 helps us do that, God has used it for a good purpose.

So, Chisholm Baptist Church, let me just close by saying, "I miss you! I miss you a lot!" It will be so good when we can gather together again.....so good. I hope that is your desire as well. I pray that this time of physical separation will help us realize how much we should value our brothers and sisters in Christ. If you are listening and are a part of another congregation, I hope you are missing your church family as well. If you are one of the folks out there who says, "I have Jesus. Who needs the church?" I hope that when Covid-

19 is over you will find a group of believers in Jesus that can be your spiritual family. I would add that Chisholm Baptist Church is a great family to be a part of....no brag....just fact. At the same time, **I pray that our longing for fellowship with other believers will be surpassed by an ever deeper longing for our eternal home,** especially when our world seems overwhelmed with uncertainty, confusion, and even chaos. It is good and can be encouraging to remember that God has prepared a city for us, and that no matter what happens, we are on our way home.