

## Imagining New Ways Forward (various scriptures)

It seems fairly common these days that part of the recovery process from injury or surgery includes physical therapy or some form of “rehab” for short, that helps patients to regain the ability to do routine tasks. Sometimes that means simply relearning something that has been momentarily lost, sometimes it means learning to do routine tasks differently in light of what’s occurred. How much time one spends in rehab depends, of course, upon the severity of the situation and the stamina of the person experiencing it. But the goal, in every case, is to help the patient acquire as much facility as possible in resuming the activities necessary for daily life. And, as many of you who have experienced it can attest, it helps, even though the experience itself can be challenging or at times unpleasant. What keeps one going during that challenge is knowing that the end result will be worth it.

This idea of rehab has surfaced in my thought as I’ve been reflecting on and praying about the state of the church in light of our emergence from the constraints of lockdown due to the COVID pandemic.

In May of last year, when this started, I think we all believed it would be a short-term inconvenience. The suspension of in-person church activity was a bit of a novelty where we scrambled to find a way to continue to be present and minister for what we thought would be over by summer. There was a steep learning curve on how to produce and offer worship services online, and we all got on board with Zoom for meetings. The distraction of learning new skills and adapting to this temporary shift kept us from thinking through the implications of this situation for the long haul. By the time we realized that this wasn’t going to resolve by summer, or even fall, we had also begun to be fatigued by the online experience, though we were glad to have at least that.

As things began to loosen up, a sense of both relief and restlessness developed—we were glad to see light at the end of the tunnel and we’ve anticipated engaging once more as a gathered community of faith. We’re thankful for the additional opportunities our online presence has offered; we’re delighted to include the online community in our circle of faith and we want to continue that level of relationship going forward. But as we consider what it means to resume our gathered life, we’re finding that it’s not simply a matter of throwing open the doors and resuming ministry where we left off. Part of that is due to the fact that we’re not all at the same place we were when we left off. Some of us are ready to return without reservation to gathered community life, but some are not because children have not been vaccinated at the same rate as adults, so there’s concern about the risk of infection. Not everyone has been vaccinated and that’s a concern for others who might be more vulnerable than most. In some situations, life has been so jumbled during the week with work at home or hybrid education competing for time, bandwidth, and attention, that weekends have needed to be more relaxed and less demanding which doesn’t always fit into weekend specific church life. From conversations with several folks, I’ve learned that some have begun to prefer “doing church” online, and I’m not making a case for or against this, I’m simply recognizing that it is a reality and part of a new normal.

All of this and more has prompted the idea of church rehab in my thought—we’re in a place where we’re ready to resume as a community of faith, but we have to relearn some things about what that means, and, perhaps, it also means that we have to learn how to do some of what we previously considered necessary to our life as the church in new ways. So what follows is a “thinking out loud” about that process in an attempt to spark conversation, prayer, and, in the words of the author of Hebrews, to consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

A good place to start, it seems to me, is to remember who we are. A local congregation such as ours, is a community of people who gather together around the central conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is the sovereign Lord over all of creation, that in his earthly life he was God in the flesh who by that revealed the nature and essence of the God described in the historical record of the Jews, and by virtue of the life he led and in what he taught gave us the clearest picture of how God envisioned we could live the life for which we were created. Jesus called

this the Kingdom of God, the foundation of which relies upon having an experiential relationship with God through which the power of God, called grace, enables human beings to live into the fullest expression of that envisioned life. This is life as it was originally designed—human and divine agency working together in an environment created for mutual fellowship and benefit. The glory of God—meaning God’s character—fully inhabited humankind, who, in the image of God had the freedom to live as deeply into that character as possible. But that freedom also created the possibility for humankind to choose against God, which eventually happened plunging humankind into a hopeless situation where the glory of God no longer dwelled in humankind, where mutual fellowship was no longer sustainable, and humankind lost its built-in union with God leaving us to live with limited resources and ability. This breach of relationship as the result of sin—literally missing the mark, choosing against rather than with God—was repaired by the death and resurrection of Jesus providing the means whereby the glory of God could again inhabit people who place their trust in Jesus receiving, as a consequence, his Spirit within them enabling them to live once again in union with God in ways described in the teaching of Jesus. A congregation then, is a localized gathering of people who have placed their trust in Jesus, are indwelt by his Spirit, who by the way they live display in their life the character of God and they gather collectively to give thanks for the life they live, to bear witness to the presence of Christ in their life, and to worship Christ as the ruler of life. At its core is the idea of relationship with God and that living in light of this relationship is the most sensible way to live.

What we do, as a congregation, flows out of who we are, and since we are united to God through Jesus, we are followers of Jesus, literally students of his, learning from him how to live in the awareness of God’s presence and how to grow into the fullness of God’s character which at its core is love, as Paul described in Ephesians 5: Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love just as Christ loved us...So we gather to learn from Jesus how to know God—and here knowing means as much experiencing God as it does acquiring understanding—and, in line with this, how to love.

And this is where we might need to rethink how to do this. In his earthly life, Jesus gathered a group of learners to be with him, that is to share life with him, not for daily lectures and copious note-taking, but for learning by participation in his manner of life. By being with him in daily life, they learned as much by what they observed as by what he taught. They saw him in normal life situations common to all and saw love expressed by how he responded. The teaching gave them the basis for it, but their experience with him demonstrated the application. In our day, we tend to lean more in the direction of lectures and copious note-taking where acquiring knowledge is the goal—a certain amount of which is helpful—but we falter in the application pieces, and by that I mean in observing or absorbing how the love of Christ responds to life’s contingencies. Small groups are often heralded as places where we get personal, and perhaps some do, but for the most part we simply do on a smaller scale what we do in large groups—we study together, perhaps sharing some personal concerns for prayer, and then we have refreshments while discussing the Seahawks. What if, instead of a class paradigm where we repeatedly study portions of scripture, whether here during the Sunday schedule or during the week in groups, we spent more of our time in describing how we saw or conveyed the love of Christ in the situations we encountered that week? What if we cultivated what I’ll call spiritual friends, perhaps just three or four, who meet on a regular basis to unpack how the love of Christ in them responds to their home life, their work life, their social life, their community engagement, or their neighbor. That would be a place to also inquire: how do you think the love of Christ responds to this issue, or problem? What if some larger groups met during our Sunday schedule to discuss and plan how the love of Christ responds to contemporary issues in our community or world? We learn from one another because the Spirit of Christ lives in each of us—engaging in that kind of exchange leans into the observation aspect of following Jesus. By engaging in this kind of dialogue and learning, we encourage one another in our expression of love beyond how it impacts us into how it impacts those around us. And this is precisely how God continues to love the world—God does it through those in whom God’s Spirit dwells as they connect to the needs, brokenness, and

vulnerability of others. These are some of the routine tasks of people connected to God, and these are what we need to rethink going forward.

One final thought: rehab is a team effort—that's true in a physical sense, it's especially true in the spiritual. No single one of us is the complete expression of Christ—we are this together as each of us adds in our experience, our understanding, our perspective, our opportunity. Those whose lives have been shaped for a long time in the love of God have much to convey for the sake of the whole. Those who are newer to the life of faith have much to convey in the fresh perspectives they offer. We each have something to contribute to the whole expression of Christ for our communities, but we do this best together. We're not designed to simply be consumers of religious goods, we're made to be partners with God, through Christ, in the power of the Spirit to display the glory of God, to express the love of Christ, and touch the world by and with grace. But we haven't always dreamed large, meaning that we've been okay with doing what we can reasonably project or imagine. So part of what we need to do differently is to find ways to release imagination beyond our own horizons and pray towards outcomes that will only occur by God's hand. All of us have a place at that table, we need to find more chairs and dare each other to believe God more. AMEN