

## Remarks for COB Panel: “The Church after COVID”

March 5, 2021

### Creativity under Pressure

One of my friends, Pastor Stephen Gerhard, told me once about a course that he and a few other seminarians requested, and got, from one of their preaching professors during their senior year. They called the course, “Creativity under Pressure,” and the only work of the class was for every student to preach to the others every week, for 14 weeks in a row. Many of us know that kind of creativity; we may know it so well that we do not any longer remember when we were first learning it, but looking back, at least for myself, such a course would have been much harder to do well in than any other course in my senior year.

All of us know more about creativity under pressure than we did 12 months ago. We know now that we have more resources for adaptive leadership than we thought. We can lead in situations where no one has the answer, where there exists no classic textbook for the subject area, no early adopter to imitate. In the Life of Brian, one member of the crowd listening to Jesus preach the Sermon on the Mount complains, “He’s makin’ it up as he goes along!” So also, the Spirit is makin’ it up, inspiring us as we go along.

I offer one example from the seminary context. The idea of “flipping the classroom” is not new in higher education. The concept means that we understand time with the professor and time without the professor in precisely the opposite way that much traditional higher ed has constructed these two things. When many of us went to school, we prepared alone, or perhaps in study groups. Between times of preparation, we entered a classroom where we were, for the most part, passive learners. We took notes. We were quiet until the end of the hour, when time might permit some Q and A. Even that was a time when the conversation was mostly from student with the questions to professor with the answers.

A flipped classroom imagines that the professor’s content is available and assigned *before* class. Her lectures, his tips on what to look for in the reading, those stories of their parish ministry from the 20<sup>th</sup> century: all of it is in the students’ hands *before* class. Then the time in class, with the professor, morphs into precisely the kind of discussion that adaptive leaders must have competence in convening. To the class, both professor and students bring sticky questions, case studies, and 21<sup>st</sup> c. stories, and together the group works that ground. Creativity under pressure.

Southern Seminary and Lenoir-Rhyne University faculty had been experimenting with a flipped classroom here and there before the pandemic. When we realized last summer that we would not be “back to normal” for the fall semester, we made a university-wide decision to adjust the time students spent in class and build what had been class-delivered content into mini-lectures, handouts, and web pages that students would access on their own. Zoom or class time with the professor, then, limited as it was, would be focused on working with the material students had already accessed. Our classrooms flipped because they had to. No one wants to spend three hours watching a talking head on Zoom!

The result is that students’ location in the learning changed. The structure of a flipped classroom does not as easily infantilize them. It does not reward them for being sponges and good note takers. The pandemic forced a different pedagogy on us, and we are coming away with better leadership formation.

We are also coming out of the pandemic with a general sense that loss does not always mean decline. This leads to the question of what else—besides an over-reliance on lecture—might we lose for the good?

I am taking this question forward as the seminary adapts our leadership formation to new needs in the church and world. What are other good losses for us?

### **The Embodied Word**

I remember how incredibly awkward it felt to me in about 1990 when I prayed, over the phone, with a woman who was headed to surgery the next morning. I am sort of over that particular awkwardness now, but the pandemic reminds me on a daily basis of the absence of other bodies in the expression of my Christianity. We have an outdoor Eucharist at Southern, complete with widely distanced chairs, nods to one another at the sharing of the peace, and hermetically sealed and individually packaged “Communion elements” purchased from Amazon.

Meanwhile, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Other people have commented on how this particular plague, communicable as it is by our very breathing, is particularly good at threatening to kill us simply for being human. The virus finds it easiest to infect us when we are embracing, eating, singing together, or caring for each other. I would add only that in this respect, the virus has not only threatened what is human about our lives, but also what is divine about them. “Christ plays in ten thousand places,” Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, “Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his.” Yes! And so much of that is lost in the two-dimensional reflections of limbs and eyes on Zoom.

One of the things that the Resurrection of our Lord means is that he is now and forever *embodied*. Our theology of preaching and of the sacraments make the same claim that our theology of Resurrection does. Christ is risen! The Word is living, breathing, and embodied. The Word is present in the airflow necessary for speech. The Word is present in the water necessary for Baptism and the foodstuffs necessary for Eucharist. It is true that, even in pandemic, we are being kept alive by worship, prayer, and fellowship characterized by accommodations to distance. Even so, I doubt that we will realize, until we are back together, just how lonely and hungry we are now for the bodies of each other and the body of Christ.

COVID has taught us anew, of course, that some types of bodies are safer in American than other types of bodies; some bodies are apparently more expendable. The old and the incarcerated come immediately to mind, but also those bodies whose work is hard and whose load is heavy. My colleagues on the panel will speak directly to this point.

My point, for now, is that beyond COVID, we will have questions to ask about how our ministries *do* what they *proclaim*. What is the relationship between medium and message? If Christ is at the center of Christian community, what does it mean to be community in immaterial ways? I am not speaking against digital media in general here. I am only saying that we are never *not* our bodies. And I am saying that at the very center of our faith is a crucified and risen Body. I am taking into “life after COVID” a new sense, ironically maybe, that I am more than a talking head or a digital image constructed by a collection of pixels. We are more than that together, and our ministries are more faithful when they look for ways to proclaim our incarnation as well as Christ’s.

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