

Over the past few years, we’ve developed a great capacity to do things remotely. There are online universities, through which one can attend classes and get a degree using a computer. Zoom, and other platforms like it, have made it possible to attend meetings remotely. Hybrid worship is now pretty much the norm. Live streaming and Facebook Live make it possible for folks to attend worship from a distance.

I’m a big fan of all these things. There are some meetings I prefer to have on zoom, instead of being in person. I’m grateful for all the technological tools that allow us to stay connected remotely. Having said that, I want to suggest to you, we should not lose sight of the value of meeting face-to-face. If we conform our lives to remoteness, we risk missing sacred moments.

The Apostle Paul made missionary journeys all around the Mediterranean world. He brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, to regions we now think of as part of Europe. His ministry was to establish and build up churches throughout the Mediterranean world.

Paul couldn’t be in two places at once. Therefore, he ministered to churches and individuals remotely. He wrote letters. Half of the New Testament are letters to churches or individuals, written by Paul or composed by a follower of Paul and attributed to him. So, he had a system for mentoring and ministering remotely. In a way, he mentors us remotely. Churches still go to his letters for wisdom and guidance for following in the way of Jesus.

His second letter to Timothy purports to be penned by Paul from a prison cell in Rome, to his younger protégé and companion. I think our reading today contains some of the most touching words in the New Testament. Paul claims to be very near the end of his life. “I have fought the good fight,” Paul writes, “I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

Then, he urges Timothy to come to visit him in jail, as soon as possible. You can sense the urgency in his words: “Do your best to come to me soon.” The urgency may be that Paul is coming to the end of his life, but the text provides a clue as to another reason. Paul asked Timothy to bring him some of his items: his cloak, which he thinks he left in Troas, and his books and parchments.

Paul’s cloak would have been a heavy outer garment to protect him from the cold. His need for his cloak indicated winter was coming. He needed his cloak to protect him from the cold in his dreary jail cell. In addition, winter weather could conceivably make it difficult to cross the Mediterranean Sea. In other words, he wanted Timothy to come quickly, because, at some point, it would be too late.

Paul had an effective remote relationship with Timothy, but this was a moment when Paul needed him to be there in person. In the letter, Paul wrote, “At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me.” We don’t know if his first defense refers to his present stint in jail or an earlier arrest, but the point was thoughts and prayers from a distance weren’t enough. He needed his friends and supporters to “come to his defense,” to physically be at his side.

Paul told Timothy to do his best to come to him. It seems Paul realized Timothy might not be able to make the trip in time. There might be a personal or family situation that would prevent Timothy from making the trip. Or he might have a crisis occurring in his own church for which he needed to be present. But Paul told him to do his best to come, because this was a moment in which his presence was vitally important.

I think this is a message for us as well as Timothy. We can’t always be present when someone needs us. None of us can be two places at once. There are health concerns which require common sense distancing, but there’s a reason to do our best to show up for people in person.

In fact, that’s what Christianity is about. It’s about goodness and love becoming incarnate. The word incarnate means “embodied in flesh.” It wasn’t enough for the divine to be ethereal, or abstract, or remote. The Word, Christ, became flesh and dwelt among us. Faith takes form in flesh. Jesus physically touched the blind and the lame and they were healed. We can get by for a time, doing things remotely. It’s great in a pinch, but ours is an incarnational faith.

There’s something incredibly special about that. That’s why people who never go to church will show up on Christmas Eve. There’s something so appealing, so affirming, so fulfilling about hearing that story of the divine meeting us in flesh and blood, God with us. That’s our ministry. When we incarnate goodness, when we incarnate love, when we show up for one another, that’s when we are at our best.

Years ago, I heard this story. Late one night, a young girl was asleep in her bed. Suddenly, she was awakened by an intense thunderstorm. She ran to her mother’s bedroom, and jumped into the bed. Her mother said, “Didn’t I tell you God will protect you. Now, go back to bed.” The girl said, “Yes, mama, but tonight, I need someone with skin.”

I think we all have those moments when we need someone with skin. Paul did. One thing that has become clear to me, over the last couple years, is that there is no substitute for being together. I’ve attended continuing education events and workshops over Zoom. As helpful as it is to meet remotely, there’s something intangible that gets lost without in-person interaction with the other students and teachers.

They say the vast majority of communication happens nonverbally. It happens with subtle facial expressions. It happens with body language. We form connections that can’t be made through a computer. When people get together in a room, a certain spontaneity or synergy becomes possible.

Earlier this month, there was a women's retreat here at the church. Nearly 30 folks gathered in Fellowship Hall for a day of spiritual exercises and sharing. I can't tell you how many participants have described how meaningful it was for them to dedicate time to be with one another face-to-face. We've done a great job staying connected remotely, particularly with worship, but it's something special when hundreds of folk fill a sanctuary to sing hymns, to celebrate, and to hear live music.

Have you ever seen a television news story of a servicemember returning home to surprise a loved one? A young boy will be in his classroom at school. His mom or his dad, who has been away for a year, sneaks up from behind him. When he finally realizes his dad has returned, he throws his arms around him and just breaks down into tears. Families can stay in touch remotely, but that kind of joy can only happen in the flesh.

Every time I preside at a memorial service, I try to remember to say something about the importance of each person's presence. Even if you don't know what to say to a grieving person, even if it feels awkward to not quite know what to do at such a time, just our presence speaks. Just being there speaks a word of comfort and life.

Have you ever waited to visit someone until it was too late? Years ago, I had a great friend who struggled with ALS. If you know anything about ALS, you know it's debilitating and can progress incredibly fast. He was living in Orono, Maine. I was living in the Boston area. I had it on my mind to get up there and see him, but I waited until it was too late. I have few regrets in my life, but most of them involve failing to show up in person.

That's why 2 Timothy is significant for me. It's a reminder to do my best to come before winter, to show up, in the flesh, before it's too late. So, do your best to make your love for your family and friends palpable. Do your best to physically show up for your church family.

Do your best to show up for folks in need.

I know there are good reasons for distancing. I know that Zoom and worshipping remotely are really important options to have. But our presence with one another is something special. Ours is a tangible faith. It's incarnational. Even the God of the universe took on flesh and dwelt among us.

Because, every now and then, we all need someone with skin.