



SITTING SIDE BY SIDE IN CHURCH

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By Kathleen Parker, Columnist

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PAWLEYS ISLAND, S.C. -- An odd thing happened last Sunday. A friend was visiting and invited me to join her for church -- not in a physical house of worship but streamed via Zoom from her pastor in Arlington, Virginia.

Churches around the state are suspending services, and the Rev. David Hanke of Restoration Anglican Church was road-testing Zoom with congregants who wanted to worship virtually. Jody and I sat side-by-side, possibly in our pjs, while Hanke fidgeted with various audio and visual gadgets. Fellow parishioners -- some solo, some couples, others families -- came into focus in a Hollywood Squares grid along one side of the screen.

Most were casually dressed, as was Hanke, who was seated in his office. At one count, more than 100 had joined the service, which meant that at least 200 would have been seated in the pews on a pre-coronavirus Sunday. Zoom, which I hadn't experienced previously, made possible what the virus had made impossible -- the gathering of community in common prayer and worship. At one point, some attempted to sing a hymn a cappella. Let's just say, the Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer were smoother.

More novel than the virtual service was the experience of joining a friend of 20 years in prayer. Our more-natural bonding experiences

have revolved over the years around journalism and, in the sole interest of anthropological research, shopping. For just a moment, I wasn't sure which pitch and volume I should seek. But something happened that was both personal and intimate -- and yet of all one thing.

Perhaps this is why so many people attend a house of worship regularly. Or, perhaps, the threat of a life-threatening disease opens us up to the possibility of grace. As Americans and people around the world seek answers during this strangest of times, I suspect millions of others will seek spiritual solace along with the medical tests that may foretell each individual's degree of suffering or reprieve.

In the meantime, social distancing and self-quarantine these next couple of weeks (or longer) offer opportunities we might not otherwise have had. I was struck by Hanke's plea that we embrace the slowing-down. Some people may feel lonely as they ride out the virus in isolation; others may feel crowded by large families or rambunctious children.

But many will also have a chance to enjoy that rarest of pleasures -- or perhaps torments -- free time. The 17th-century philosopher Blaise Pascal

said that all of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit alone in a room. On normal days, for many of us, it's off to the races preceded by a rude and ruthless alarm. There are stocks to trade, newspapers to publish, movies to direct, businesses to run, children to educate, invalids to feed and, yes, wars to wage. So accustomed are we to the weird virtue of multi-tasking that the notion of sitting alone in a room can be more angst-inducing than a multitude of alternatives.

Now, suddenly, there's time to think -- to read, write, paint, build, create. Time for long walks, time to pay attention to the arrival of spring and time to listen. Grace, they say, comes to those who listen. Of course, so much time will drive some people crazy, so it really is a challenge as well as an opportunity. Binge-watching movies is also an option, don't get me wrong. As a highly functional obsessive-compulsive, I've already reorganized my refrigerator to within an inch of its life and am plotting other projects that will leave no molecule unturned.

Who knows what will come of all this? When Shakespeare was quarantined during the plague, he wrote "King Lear." The only book I ever wrote

was while I had a broken leg, a lesser contribution to the arts, I concede. Perhaps I'll write another -- or at least long letters to friends I never meant to set aside.

I've often said that America needs a common enemy to make us come together -- to solve the riddle of partisan gridlock and to become one, united nation again. Perhaps, COVID-19 is that foe. Hanke closed out his sermon by reminding us that it doesn't matter whether we are lined up in pews or piled on a sofa with a gaggle of giggly children waving to their Sunday School pals on a computer.

What matters, in good times as well as bad, is people and community. It has taken a terrible virus to at least remind us of this eternal truth. Surely, there is grace in that.