

iSOULation 6

Earlier this week on a ZOOM call a colleague was explaining to someone that as a parish staff and community we want to provide a way for people of faith to, "Come together away from each other." This caught my ear in part because on the surface this makes no sense and because it sounds like a comment that Jesus might have made if he was on a Zoom call during the coronavirus. In the flow of conversation during the meeting this person filling up her Zoom square with flowing scarlet locks inadvertently connected me to the confusion and wisdom that is conveyed to us in many of Jesus' sayings. Jesus had numerous sayings that on the surface seemed incoherent. Comments like, "many who are first will be last and the last first" (Mark 10:31). "For whoever would save his/her life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). He would speak phrases that were like whooooo there's a lot to unpack there Jesus and that is precisely what I thought about her statement "Come together away from each other." I'm going to need a moment...several moments to think that through, like I'm not sure that the 40 minutes I'm allotted with my free Zoom account are going to be enough for me to think this all the way through.

Coming together by literally being near or close to one another is the way that we have known church. It seems that century after century community has been an integral part of being a Christian. Comments have already been made about how this is changing and challenging time for us about how we are all adapting and pivoting with our jobs, our families, our leisure time and our faith lives. We are learning how to come together away from each other in all of these arenas.

Since the beginning of the church Christians were gathering in homes, on mountainsides, by the sea and most importantly for Catholics around the altar. Small groups of people gathered in these spots and others, united by their faith. The notion of "Come together away from each other" has not been a way of church that we are accustomed to or schooled in. In grad school I never heard anyone mention fellowship from afar. No instead it's been ingrained in us to join together in community with one another so much so that one of the worship books we use is called "Gather."

Community wasn't just an emphasis of the early church the modern understanding of what it is to be church also focuses on community. In the 20th century the first American theologian to be named a Cardinal, Avery Dulles developed and defined 6 models of the church (ways in which we define and are to understand church). Two of the 6 models focus on church as community – Community of Believers/Body of Christ and Community of Disciples. That means that a little over 33% or 1/3 of his definition and understanding of what it is to be church is wrapped up in community.

During the coronavirus there have been small moments of being together while apart, but it seems as the weeks of staying at home increase in duration people are growing weary, frustrated, angry, insulted and divided. We might be a bit forlorn for the camaraderie that seemed to initially monopolize the COVID stories. Those of

meaningful, wonderful, supportive and loving ways people were coming together at this moment in time. Instead now we see images of armed protestors and masked medical personnel sharing their divergent sentiments on the situation. We read or hear about conflicting models and opinions about what is safest and best for everyone. With the disagreement and disdain coming out of the daily news cycle and our social media feeds we may be a bit reluctant to “Come together away from each other” especially those with whom we disagree. After a month of this new normal a lot of us are on edge. I saw the effects of this twice this week. Once in a store a man aggressively yelled at an employee after she reminded him that he needed to be wearing a mask. Or seeing a sign on someone’s cart letting us know that she wasn’t hoarding but shopping for supplies for a non-profit’s clients/guests (I wondered what kind of comments or dirty looks she had previously endured prompting her to make such a sign for her cart). Perhaps this moment is calling us to craft a COVID covenant. This COVID covenant would call us to come together at this moment as children of God. In this COVID covenant we would understand that we all are experiencing this differently, that we have varying opinions and that this situation is stressful and challenging but we are committed to getting through this together (while 6 feet apart) finding strength in God and in the reminder that we all God’s beloved children.

In IL we still have about three weeks remaining in our shelter in place order. I’ve heard it takes 21 days to form a new habit. So maybe 3 weeks of practicing the COVID covenant we’ll have made it into a habit of supporting, being calm and patient with one another (not a bad habit to have). After 21 days instead of finding more ways to distance and separate ourselves from others (especially those we disagree with) perhaps we’ll be encouraged and discover ways to come together away from one another. I know it takes a minute to process that doesn’t it?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

How have you felt separated from others?

What helps you to feel closer to others at this time?

Have you judged or been annoyed/frustrated with the way someone has acted during this time?

What can you do to help implement the COVID covenant? What is something you can do to bring people together while apart?