

A letter from Pastor Rich:

Dear friends in my family of faith at Grace Lutheran Church,

I'd like to tell you that I miss every one of you. I'd like to tell you that, but Christians aren't supposed to lie so I can't. The truth is that I've been enjoying a week with Bridgette in Bend, Oregon where we honeymooned ten years ago and I simply haven't been thinking about y'all much at all! And right this moment I'm probably busy going through security at the airport, so you gathering for worship without me is a thought pushed aside by more immediate concerns. Sorry about that.

The idiom "absence makes the heart grow fonder" is quite commonly spoken. The concept of loving affection growing when lovers are parted goes back to the Roman poet Sextus Aurelius Propertius who died when Jesus Christ was a youth. The line we know so well today comes from a song by Thomas Haynes Bayly published in 1844. It's amazing that it has been around for so long because, quite frankly, I think "absence makes the heart grow fonder" is a bunch of hooey.

Maybe in the short-term it's kind of true. If you're separated from somebody or something you love you miss them with strong emotion, maybe are willing to forget any annoying characteristics they possess and your desire to have them around intensifies. But over the long haul you end up forgetting them. They may come to mind now and again, but you get used to them being gone and you just learn to deal with it. Sometimes you find somebody or something else to take their place.

This is tragically true when it comes to church attendance and the reception of the Lord's Supper there.

I'm sure most of you would agree that church attendance is a habit and, as with all habits, you can fall out of the habit. This is one of the big worries of pastors as the Covid pandemic winds down. For months people fearing the virus stayed away from worship on the advice of the medical

experts. Now that things are opening up again and more and more people are vaccinated it's time to come back to worship. But how many are just out of the habit and aren't going to make the effort to get back into it? And let's face facts; for some folks the pandemic was just a convenient excuse to justify not going to a church that they didn't attend much before there was a pandemic. But there is something much deeper in play here.

What is the central event of this Divine Service of worship? It's not the singing of hymns. It's not the pastor's sermon, no matter how enlightening that might be. It's not even the words of absolution that by Christ's own authority declare your sins to be forgiven. It's the Lord's Supper! This sacred meal is the very divine, ascended and glorified body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ present here for us to consume and receive forgiveness, life, salvation, pardon and peace! If there is one singular reason for you to be here on Sunday, the Eucharistic Feast is it!

So, does absence make the heart grow fonder? There is no communion today. Does that break your heart? Are you going to leave today with kind of an empty feeling, like you missed out on something good? Is it maybe going to feel like you didn't even go to church? I hope it does. Jesus is usually here to tangibly feed you the entirety of the blessings He won by His cross, but today He didn't show up. That's sad. You're right to feel let down.

And yes, it's true that the Word proclaimed in the liturgy and hymns and the forgiveness spoken following your confession are all effective—God gives His good gifts in many ways. And it is true that the Sacrament will return next week, so maybe I'm overstating the case a bit. But the Lord's Supper is a truly unique and sacred gift from Jesus and one for which we should fondly long so, in the short term, yes, it's absence should make your heart grow fonder.

In light of this I'd like to quote Paul's letter from our Epistle lesson: *"Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and*

*bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”*

Some folks—folks that might even still call themselves Christian—have been absent from the Lord’s table so long that their hearts have grown cold. They’ve become enamored with that outer nature that is wasting away—the things of a fallen world and a mortal life that do not last. The absence of the Supper hasn’t made the heart grow fonder. They’ve forgotten the grace God extends in this meal that renews the inner nature day after day, week after week. This is a tragedy, but sadly, such hardening of the heart has happened to Christians from the beginning—Jesus warned of it in the parable of the sower.

So in my absence and the absence of the Lord’s Supper today...and to spare Joe from having to spout any complex and deep theological truths, I’d just like to give you simple ammunition for a conversation you can have with someone who has lapsed from the desire to receive the Lord’s Supper yet still considers himself in the kingdom.

You can ask if they’re a Christian. If they say “yes” then you can ask them if they agree that Jesus is their Lord and King. If they agree, you can ask if that means they should do what Jesus says. If they say “yes,” you can then remind them that Jesus said pretty clearly, “Do this in remembrance of me” and Christians have been doing it for 2000 years.

At this point you very well might get some reaction about not having to go to church, or the church being full of hypocrites, or how they had a bad experience at church or any of a million other lame excuses. But you can stay on point.

Simply remind them that their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ made a point of preparing a table for them in which He places all the benefits won by His agony and death on the cross the very next day. He told His disciples to do this meal in remembrance of Him, not as a law to obey, but

that by means of it His grace would be extended in a way that could be felt, touched and tasted—a tangible part of the outer world given to renew the inner nature day after day. Then simply tell them that the invitation of the Lord stands for them, and every Sunday they should consider why they turn that invitation down.

If there is any truth to the idiom “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” it is my prayer that such a conversation will remind someone of that sacred meal that is absent in their lives and, by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, they will eagerly seek it out again, and the community of believers will joyfully receive them in communion at the table.

As for you all sitting in the pews today, I pray this whole strange worship service reminds you of how blessed you are to receive the Sacrament regularly. If you weren’t missing the Supper when you got here, I hope you are as you leave. It is the promise of God served up on a plate. When you receive it in faith, you receive the Savior Himself and the peace He brings in this life along with the paradise He delivers in the next.

As for me, I may not miss you all personally, but my soul does have a longing to be gathered around the table with you this day, receiving the eternal blessings in Christ’s heavenly food. Pray for our safe travel that we may rejoice all the more next week when we gather and have our inner nature renewed by the body and blood of Jesus.

Faithfully and joyfully yours in Christ,

Pastor Rich