My iPhone broke last Sunday night. I didn’t break it; it broke. Just quit working. This didn’t seem fair to me. We are cut off from one another in so many ways because of the coronavirus pandemic, and now this.

Of course, I still have an iPad and a Mac and a MacBook Pro. I’m an all Apple guy, don’t you know?! So, I can still iMessage and Facebook Message and FaceTime and Zoom, but all of a sudden, there I was feeling naked without a phone. Well, I do have a landline, but really that’s just so that I don’t miss calls from telemarketers. I should give you an update on my communications health: my replacement iPhone arrived by FedEx on Tuesday, so now I’m fully recovered.

This all got me thinking about how we respond to changes in our world and in our lives. Losses, in particular. Without a cell phone, I was barely out of touch, given all the other communication devices I had. But I was tempted at first to dwell on what I could not do, rather than what I still could do. And when I shifted my focus to what I still could do, I began to realize that this devastating deprivation I thought I was experiencing actually opened up other things for me to do. Like writing handwritten notes. Sitting on the porch and eavesdropping on the birds talking to each other. Giving Kim my full and undivided attention. Let’s not go there …

Across these past weeks, I’ve been talking to my Christian, Jewish and Muslim friends about how we adapt our spiritual and religious life in our communities. We have shared stories about how each of our faiths have a record of reinvention in crisis times. The key is to focus on what’s left, not what’s lost.

In the years following the destruction of Jerusalem and Herod’s Temple in 70 CE, Jewish life was reinvented. It had been a combination of Temple and synagogue worship. The Temple was home base for all the great festivals, like Passover, Yom Kippur and the like. But with the Temple gone, the rabbis asked themselves if they really needed a building to maintain their covenant community and their
duty to God. While wandering about in the region of the Holy Land not far from where Jesus was born, they reinvented Jewish life around prayer, study and deeds of lovingkindness. The loss of the Temple was traumatic and disorienting, but they soon found their spiritual footing. It wasn’t as easy as simply saying, “no Temple, no problem,” but they were able to go back to their roots and remember that they were the people of God before they had a building they could call the house of God.

We are in that time now again, only our challenge is far easier than theirs. And when we consider the passage from Acts 2 that we read today, again you can see that the Spirit of God was innovating from the very start. The early church had no church building with a sign out front that said First Baptist Church of Jerusalem or Antioch Baptist Church or whatever. They had the apostles, they had the Hebrew scriptures, they had food and possessions, they had the Spirit of Christ within and among them, and they had each other. Which is all to say, they had church.

Some of you may have seen the opinion piece Rabbi David Stern and I authored earlier this week in the *Dallas Morning News*. In the print edition, there was a photo of church doors with a sign hanging on them that read: “CLOSED.” We know what they meant, but the truth is, we have never closed the church, even during the COVID-19 lockdown. Only the building is closed.

So, if we are open still and reinventing ourselves during this time, what might we learn from the way the early church did church that we still can do? Let’s focus there—not on what we can’t do now, but on what we still can do.

First, the early church *devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*. Now, we don’t have the apostles still with us, but we have their teaching. And when we gather in our Sunday school classes, even if we have to do it over Zoom or Facebook Live, we are attending to their teaching. Studying scripture together is part of the ongoing spiritual formation of the people of God. We don’t just share our own ideas about things today, we listen to our ancestors in the faith and give them priority in our contemplations. The apostles—and before them the prophets of the Hebrew
Scriptures—were closest to the mighty acts of God in the birth of our faith. We don’t dismiss them just because they are dead. We let their voices be heard. Their witness lives on. We can still do that.

The breaking of bread is probably a reference to Holy Communion. Don’t neglect the sharing together at the Lord’s table. We are doing that, too. It’s not the way we want to, but we are finding ways. You’re going to do that in your home in a few minutes. We will all be doing it together and allowing the Spirit of God to make us one with one another as we do. We may not physically gather at the table, but we can spiritually gather.

They shared their meals together—both the Lord’s supper and their daily supper—with glad and generous hearts. That is, they were grateful to God for what they had, focusing on that, not what they lacked. And they were generous with one another, making sure everyone had a place at the table. We can still do that.

And we are attending to our prayers. Partly this is a reference to worship. We don’t have the Temple, but neither did the early church after a time. They had to gather in homes to worship God and pray. And well, how about that? So are we now. We can still do that.

Attending to our prayers is also the way we are sharing our lives and concerns with one another by keeping up with one another. I am on the email list of several Sunday school classes, and you all are doing an incredible job of praying for one another as you have needs. We can still do that.

And then generosity. Wow, did you hear what they did back then? All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. The church back then depended on one another and held nothing back. They didn’t have any notion of individualism in their Christian lives. They were a community.

And I am seeing that in you right now. My goodness, you are giving and giving and giving. And your gifts are helping those who are unable to give right now, because some among us are in perilous times financially and with their jobs. The same is true for the way we are helping our hungry and needy neighbors. We are not hoarding our
possessions; we are sharing them. So far, we have collected more than 2,500 pounds of food for the Wilkinson Center and we have delivered $3,000 worth of food on top of that from Sysco Foods. Well done, church.

Robert Wilonsky wrote in the Dallas Morning News this week about how people have been giving across Dallas in this crisis. Normally, wealthy philanthropists give big gifts and end up with their names on buildings, but through efforts coordinated by the wonderful folks at the Communities Foundation of Texas, many have been giving differently just to help those in need. If you have a heart for anybody, give them money, said Wende Burton, CFT’s senior director of community philanthropy. Even small amounts make a huge difference right now. Matthew Randazzo, president and CEO of the Dallas Foundation added: Philanthropy is the joy of giving and helping others. Everyone who can make rent and a car payment can be a philanthropist today with as little as $25. And that’s the message we need to amplify.¹

My mother-in-law is still grieving the loss of her husband Bill O’Brien. We all are. He was one of the most generous souls I knew. So, we bought her a CD player this week so that she could listen to him singing from one of his old collections. After a day of listening to his music, she came in and said to us, Is there something I can do, something I can give to honor his memory at Wilshire? Well, we got right on that and we are going to fix up the mission vision room at Wilshire and name it for Bill.

The bigger point is this: when we allow ourselves to be inspired by the apostles and saints of the church, it leads us to do amazing and generous things—things that will end with our having the goodwill of all the people. And maybe even more being added to our number who are being saved.

Yes, we can still do all that. And we are. Let’s just keep being the church, church. Amen.