

“To Seek the Kingdom, Part 2” – March 15, 2020

Each day this week, like many of you, I kept a close eye on the quickly changing situation surrounding the novel coronavirus COVID-19. We watched as the numbers of infected persons continued to rise, especially on the east and west coasts of our country, and then creep into what the coasties like to call “the flyover states,” and what we call home. States that previously had only a handful of confirmed cases, showed those increasing, sometimes doubling, each day. We watched videos and heard eye-witness stories coming out of South Korea, China, and Italy. We saw countries closing their borders to incoming air traffic, cruise ships parked while passengers endured quarantine, and airports reporting half-filled planes. We watch the stock market take a steep dive, reacting to an uncertain future.

On our Facebook and Twitter feeds, we chuckled at memes joking about the sudden disappearance of toilet paper from store shelves and quips about the potential next baby boom 9 months from now, noting that in 2033 we will dub a new generation “the Quaranteens.”

And as the week drew closer to the weekend, we received messages from state governments, urging, and many cases, requiring the cancellation of group activities that exceeded 250 persons. First it was the NBA that cancelled its season, the NCAA followed suit as did many other sports organizations and venues. Museums and theme parks closed their doors. Even Broadway closed its theatres, followed by concerts and theatrical performances around the country.

Many schools not already closed will be doing so this coming week. Solo and ensemble events were cancelled even as young musicians were polishing their pieces for performance. And pastors, church boards and judicatories around the nation scrambled and agonized over whether or not to cancel worship today. And they struggled to make sense of the situation and how to decide the best course of action for the coming days and weeks. Our session will be meeting this afternoon to discuss that very thing.

This week we also learned a couple of new concepts – social distancing and flattening the curve. As medical experts have been studying this new virus and its rate of spread, they are encouraging social distancing. Because the time of incubation could be up to two weeks, and because many people do not even become symptomatic, it is very difficult to know if someone is even carrying it. Additionally, while younger people may only suffer very mild symptoms, older people and people with underlying health conditions may become very sick if they contract this virus.

Social distancing slows the rate of transmission – it’s logic – fewer social interactions, fewer chances for someone to be exposed to the virus. This has been proven historically and

currently, with countries that have implemented immediate social distancing. When the rate of transmission is slowed down, the bell curve for how many people get infected when the virus enters a community is greatly flattened. Instead of an exponential spike, by enacting social distancing, you get a more manageable pattern that does not overburden a health care system.

Ironically, in our story from John's gospel, we find one specific type of social distancing, and we observe Jesus' response to it. A bit of history, in that time period the Jewish people had pretty strict rules about not associating with certain categories of people. Now the Samaritans, even though they did worship God, they were still seen as being impure, as people to be avoided. If you were law-abiding Jewish person, you didn't hang around with the Samaritans. It just wasn't done.

Additionally, unaccompanied women were also considered a risk to men. And what I mean by unaccompanied is, if you were out in public without your father or husband, you definitely should not be having a conversation with any man. Especially a one on one conversation. This particular woman in John's story was a further risk. The fact that she came to the well in the heat of the day, the text tells us it was noon, rather than in the morning with the other local women meant that she probably had a questionable reputation. A single Jewish man talking alone with a Samaritan woman of ill repute was a scandalous situation. And it was scandalous on multiple levels. It was definitely a situation that screamed out for social distancing. Run away, Jesus, run far away.

And what does Jesus do? He does the unthinkable.

Jesus not only talks to this Samaritan woman of questionable morality out in the open where anyone could observe this outrageous conversation, he asks her to serve him. He asks for some water from the well. Jesus tramples all over barriers meant to divide people, to separate people into us and them.

The source of Living Water models for us a breaking down of the divides that keep us wary of one another. He destroys stereotypes in a single conversation. And not only that, he puts himself in a position of need. He asks her to provide for his physical thirst. He makes himself vulnerable to a person who lives out on the margins, allowing her to fulfill his need. He not only sees her worth as a person, as an individual loved by God, but he also gives her power. He treats her as a being worthy of respect and recognizes her own strength by giving her the opportunity to serve.

This type of social distancing, this erecting of barriers between people, goes against everything that Jesus stood for. And time and again throughout the gospels, we witness Jesus crushing those barriers and building bridges of equality to those populations of people

who are seen as inferior and powerless. In this case, this type of social distancing was the wrong choice.

Friends, we live in uncertain times. It is indeed a time of crisis and confusion, as each new day brings with it, new challenges. For some it is a time of fearfulness, because everything we thought we knew and understood just a few months, weeks, or days ago has become tumultuous.

And as we are being encouraged to distance ourselves physically from one another, we don't have to succumb to isolation. The community of faith is still the community of faith, even when we may not be able to gather as we would like. We can still reach out to one another through phone calls and emails and letters. We can still look to one another for help and support, for running errands, and for prayer for one another.

We are in the season of Lent. Remember, this is a time for examining our hearts and our practices in order to draw closer to God. How fortuitous this time could be, that all those extra activities that usually pull us in a million different directions, are being cancelled or postponed. We have been given a precious gift of time to slow down and simply be. To love another and serve another in new and creative ways.

This unique time has also showed us ways that we can serve those in our community who will be negatively impacted by all these disruptions. There are children who rely on the free lunch program at schools – how can we help to make sure they have the food they need? There are parents who have to work but cannot afford child care – how can we help to provide aid for their kids? There are people in vulnerable health situations who fear going out in public to get needed groceries or medicines – how can we assist to fulfill those needs while keeping them safe? There are people who may lose their jobs due to layoffs or quarantine or illness – how can we help to keep them afloat?

This is a time of many challenges, but also many opportunities. When faced with these challenges, let us together, with God leading us, discern how best to face each challenge as it comes. We are a people of hope. Let us live into that hope, trusting in God, believing that Christ walks alongside us in this journey together, and hopeful that the Spirit will provide strength, assurance and guidance along the way.