

Lent 3 Year A 2020
March 15, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Social Distancing” seems to be the phrase of the week. Some of you have braved the public health concerns and have come out to worship today. Others of you will be reading or listening to this sermon at home in order to take preventative measures against becoming ill. Schools throughout the state are closed, many churches are closed, events are canceled, and we’re encouraged to avoid gatherings of 100 people or more. For many of us, this means staying home as much as possible, and keeping a safe distance when we do have to go out into public. Six feet seems to be the rule—stay at least six feet away from people at all times. Keep your distance in social situations.

Of course, all of this is difficult on so many levels. We’ve all seen the stress and anxiety felt around the world as people hoard food and hygiene products and cleaning supplies. We’ve felt the anxiety, the fear, the uncertainty, the insecurity. Those of us in decision-making positions have wrestled with difficult questions, and sought modifications to standard practices. But there’s another side to this distancing that can be harder to see.

We know that God created us for community. We weren’t made to live in isolation. We proclaim that the Holy Spirit gathers us together as a community to support and care for one another. But when we are faced with times like these when we can’t be near one another and gather as regularly as a community, we can feel extreme loneliness. Individuals living alone may begin to crave face-to-face contact with one another, lacking the comfort of a simple handshake or hug or pat on the back. Social distancing, though necessary in times like these, can be extremely isolating, and cause additional emotional and spiritual distress. But even when it feels like we’re completely alone, it is important to remember that God remains with us.

I imagine the Samaritan woman at the well in today’s Gospel reading knew a little bit about social distancing. She knew this probably not because of any kind of disease, but for being an outcast in her community. Her behavior is highly unusual for a woman in the first century. Normally, women would carry their water jugs to the well early in the morning to avoid the heat of the day. This also allowed them a chance to socialize with one another and catch up with what was happening in the community. Since men and women generally did not speak to one another in public, this was an opportunity for women to interact with one another.

It is telling that the Samaritan woman in today’s story is at the well around noon. It seems as though she is there alone, and because she’s not supposed to be speaking with men in public, she is quite isolated even though there are other people around her. I imagine especially once she begins her conversation with Jesus (a Jewish man), people are especially interested in keeping their distance. She is breaking all kinds of social rules. This woman also seems especially interested in the water that Jesus speaks of because it means that she will not have to return to the well and feel like such an outcast.

You see, social isolation isn’t always about disease. Sometimes people are isolated for being outcasts: for looking or acting differently than others, for a particular reputation, or simply for being awkward. No matter the reason, the result is the same: isolation from the community that God created for us.

But even in her isolation, the Samaritan woman was not alone. Jesus saw her as she approached the well that day, and Jesus treated her not as an outcast, or as Jewish people normally would have treated Samaritans, but instead, Jesus treated her as a beloved child of God.

He saw her need, and he offered her the life that only he could provide. In this conversation, Jesus strengthened the Samaritan woman by treating her with respect, he offered her love and mercy, and he accepted her just as she was.

Jesus does the same thing for us. Even when we cannot gather together as a community as regularly as we'd like, God sees us in our need and isolation. God promises to strengthen us and care for us, and God still promises us abundant love and forgiveness—even when we can't make it to church to receive the sacraments. When we find ourselves stuck at home and unable to be in face-to-face contact with our friends and faith community, we *are not* alone.

Additionally, God promises that social distancing will not last forever. After her conversation with Jesus, it seems that the Samaritan woman was restored to her community. We hear that “Many Samaritans from that city believed in [Jesus] because of the woman’s testimony.” People *listened* to the woman, they cared about what she had to say. They didn’t write her off as just another outcast that wasn’t worth their time. People *believed* her words, and came to believe in Jesus because of her.

We, too, will be restored and gather as a whole community again. To borrow some words from Bishop Satterlee’s letter to the synod on Thursday, “Though we do not know how long the present situation will last, I am certain it will not last forever. We will gather in worship as a community again. We will be fed at God’s table again. And we trust that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.”

In this time of social distancing, it has become harder to strengthen one another by our presence. It is a time when loneliness and isolation have the potential to wreak havoc on our emotional and spiritual well-being. But know this: like the Samaritan woman, God sees us. God sees us in our need, in our loneliness, fear, anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty. God knows our lives, and God knows our needs. God reaches out to each one of us with love and mercy, with compassion and comfort. God walks with us through this time so that we are *never* alone. And God promises that we will soon know the joy of restoration to the assembled body of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.