

Social Distancing has become one of the most commonly-used phrases in our nation and around the world as the novel Coronavirus has brought adjustments to our way of life.

Although the phrase is fairly new, or at least not used much beyond the realm of Sociology, we all know what social distancing is. We learned about it very early in life, actually. Think of some of the games we learned to play as we were growing up, like “keep-away”. Think of how we would say that someone had cooties, and we would run from them and do our best to exclude them. Think of how, in junior high and high school, it became so easy to mock people who wore glasses, to shun people whose clothes were old or did not fit well. Think of how those behaviors continued to be part of our repertoire even when we reached adulthood.

These behaviors may have started out as games...we may have considered them harmless, unless we were on the receiving end of the mocking or shunning. But they point to a deeper place in the human psyche and experience, don't they? Humans and many other creatures learn that in order to stay alive or to stay healthy, they must steer clear of certain things, certain people and certain creatures. In fact, the laws God gave to Moses included dietary laws that were clearly meant to keep people from eating things that could make them sick or kill them. But some of those laws also characterized normal bodily functions, behaviors and tasks as sinful or unclean because they were not clearly understood.

The Mosaic Law also addressed interactions with other nations and peoples, primarily because of their worship of other deities. The Israelites were not to make covenants or agreements with other nations in order to remain faithful to Yahweh and avoid becoming entangled with other gods. What the law to be a “live and let live” policy toward other nations became a scorched earth policy stoked by hatred and derision.

We can find examples of this hatred in nearly every culture and generation, including our own. A friend of mine pointed this out and urged people to pay attention to the ways they speak about others, when a child about the age of 6 looked at her part-Asian god-daughter and yelled, “Look, there is a Coronavirus!” A pretty stark reminder to us all, that our children and grandchildren are listening to what we say, including our off-handed prejudiced comments, and forming opinions that shape how they view and treat others.

The Samaritans were a prominent target of prejudice in Jesus' day. One might think that the name Samaritan derives from the location in which they lived, in the former Northern Kingdom of Israel named Samaria. But that is not the case. The Samaritans emerged as a distinct population in the 7th century BC, after Assyria overtook the region in 721 BC. Assyria's method for dominating a newly-seized territory was to move some people out of the area to other territories and other foreigners in. This was done with the intention that intermarriage would eventually dilute the allegiances of the Israelites to their heritage and make them easier to control.

Those who lived in the Southern Kingdom of Judea, which included Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron, were able to withstand the Assyrians. But they had no sympathy for the plight of their neighbors who had fallen under Assyrian control. They hated them, hated the way that they lived with foreigners in their midst and eventually married and had children with them. Judeans thought of Samaritans as “half-breeds”

and shunned them. Samaritans were forbidden to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, and so they developed an altar where priests could offer sacrifices atop Mount Gerazim within their own territory. Perhaps Judeans' hatred for Samaritans was rooted most deeply in their fear that what happened to them could also happen to Judea. And it did in 587 BC when Babylon overtook Judea and moved its most skilled members of society to Babylon after destroying the temple and much of the holy city.

This is why the encounter Jesus has with the woman at the well is so surprising, and frankly, so scandalous – because as the author notes, “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” Jews practiced such profound social distancing from Samaritans, that one would think they carried contagions. But it was hatred, pure and simple, festering over centuries that drove this social distancing.

It seems clear that the woman at the well was familiar with social distancing from her own Samaritan community. Many have speculated as to the reason she was at well alone in the heat of the day, when it was common for women to walk together to the well, for companionship and for safety earlier in the day.

Was it because she had been married five times and was now with another man who was not her husband?

Had her husbands all died? Was she an ancient “black widow” or an innocent woman well-acquainted with unexpected grief?

Or had they all divorced her because she was difficult to live with, because she didn't hesitate to speak her mind, as seems clear by her encounter with Jesus? Or was it because she was unable to bear children for them?

Is her boldness toward Jesus an attempt to push him away, to ensure that yet another person will find her unworthy of attention or respect? Or is she bold because she has had to fend for herself and feels no need to take anyone's baloney anymore?

Many scholars have offered explanations for her and many of those theories differ greatly. And this morning, I am not drawn to argue the validity of one over another. What I see is a woman who appears to not belong, who appears to be the recipient, deserved or undeserved, of social distancing in her community. What I see is a woman who has been isolated. What I see is Jesus, intentionally addressing her, engaging her, affirming her, and ultimately inspiring her to run to the people who don't have the time of day for her so that she can tell them about the man, the Messiah who did!

And I am struck by the parallels between this woman's experience of isolation and the isolation people may be feeling as we take steps to distance ourselves from one another because of the novel Coronavirus threat.

I think that it is wise and faithful for us to draw a clear distinction between social distancing and physical distancing.

Lent 3A – John 4
March 15, 2020

Chrysanne Timm
Bethany/St Christopher's Northport

We are being urged to adopt social distancing, but I think what we really need to do is physically distance ourselves from each other while staying in touch socially. Yes, we need to avoid catching and spreading the virus, but we can keep some physical distance while staying in touch with one another via phone, email, text, and social media. We can and we need to do so, because social isolation carries its own dangers, including cognitive decline, memory loss and even increased cardiovascular risks. We are created for community and our spirit and our bodies suffer when we are deprived of it.

We may well be at a watershed moment in history when we 21st century disciples of Jesus are being called into mission for the sake of our neighbor. We are called to care for our neighbors, and we have the means and the capacity to check in with and stay in touch with one another. We have the ability to pick up a few groceries for someone who may not be able to get out or take some chicken soup to someone who would appreciate it.

And we have the means and capacity to stay close to one another as members of this faith community, sharing God's Word and prayer together. Our leadership has made the conscious decision, guided by our bishop and others in authority, that we will not be gathering in person for the next two weeks. I believe it is a faithful decision and wise decision. And I believe that we need to be prepared for the possibility that we may not be coming together to worship for more weeks after that. I have the means for teleconferencing through a resource called Zoom. Using Zoom, I can meet with up to 100 people via their computers or by telephone. In consultation with our vestry, I am prepared to put a plan in place for us to come together next Sunday at 9:00 am via Zoom to listen to Scripture and a brief sermon and pray together – for this is our spiritual sustenance. Or, if you choose, you may access Bishop Whayne Hougland leading Morning Prayer at 10:30 at the diocesan website: www.edwm.org

I will be available to you by phone, text, email, and will visit with you upon your request as health and safety concerns allow. I plan to be in Northport two-three mornings each week, although the particular days may differ from week to week. You can reach me via cell phone at (419) 345-6134. I will attempt to forward the parish's phone number (231) 386-5037 to my own, when I know that I will not be in the office for a few days. If you are discouraged, if you need to talk, please call me. Or call one of your friends here, if that is more comfortable for you. But please, if you need to talk...call or reach out to someone.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God is faithful and will bring us through this crisis. We will move through it best by staying connected with God, with each other and with our neighbors.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, will indeed guard our hearts and our minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.