

“Jesus, Safe Distancing, and Compassionate Connecting”
 Lent 3A (March 15, 2020) - COVID-19 (SUNDAY 1)
 Scriptures: John 4:5-42; 14:27
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. Amen.<<

If you type “coronavirus” into the Google, in .82 seconds you’ll get over 6 billion hits (that’s “billion” with a “b”). Everyone is talking about this right now. People across the country and world are posting updates on social media about symptoms of the virus, about where you can go to get tested, about what they’re doing while quarantined, etc. etc. And cable news vacillates between being helpful in disseminating information and being just plain toxic with notices in flashing red on the screen and people shouting over each other, or talking heads restating talking points that blur the facts and incite fear. Professional and college sports teams have suspended their seasons. Events across the country have been postponed. The stock market has seen wild swings. Our college students are going home. Our schools are closed until Easter. And forget about Wegmans - it’s like a carcass picked clean of everything, including toilet paper of all things. Two of my brothers live in Portland, OR, and one of them owns a restaurant. His restaurant has been quite successful in the city’s tight food market, but restaurant profit margins are narrow and he needs to close down next week - he’ll lose tens of thousands of dollars each week he’s closed, which means laying off most of his employees.

I think we’re all operating on overload right now. How many notices have you gotten about the virus from schools, universities, banks, your retirement fund managers, your *church*, and even Macy’s? We’re being saturated. And all of us are living with uncertainty, taking things one day, or perhaps even one *hour* at a time.

As I’ve been reflecting on what the church’s voice should be in such uncertain times, I’ve spent time with scripture and in contemplative prayer, guided by that great contemplative thinker, Richard Rohr, whose books I’m reading this season of Lent. In his book of daily meditations titled *Yes, and...*, Rohr writes of prayer: “The word *prayer* has often been trivialized by making it into a way of getting what we want. But,” he says, “I use *prayer* as the umbrella word for any *interior journeys or practices that allow us to experience faith, hope, and love within ourselves.*” In other words, prayer in times of crisis is a way to settle ourselves, to focus our breathing, and let the spirit of God move through us as we exhale our concerns, inhale peace and trust, and allow ourselves to be loved. Maybe the analogy of parent and child would make this more concrete. What do children do when they’re scared - when they awake in tears in the middle of the night from a bad dream? They crawl into their parents’ bed for comfort. Richard Rohr says prayer is like that - less about getting what we want from God, and more about letting ourselves snuggle up to God to feel comforted.

Yes, I’ve spent time with scripture and in prayer, but I’ve also been reading this week. I re-read Albert Camus’ 1947 novel *The Plague*. Turning to this particular bit of literature seemed fitting given all we are facing as a nation and world. Camus raises questions like: How do humans respond to a crisis? What questions do they ask about life and meaning? How do they deal with suffering? What’s the role of religious leaders and the church during a time of crisis? What should people be doing? All relevant questions for us now; and all of

us - community residents and leaders, from the Cornell and Ithaca College presidents to the Mayor to the ICSD Superintendent to Directors and CEOs of local organizations to small business owners to faith leaders to individuals in households - all of us are asking questions like those Camus raises: What should we do? How should we respond? What's the role of our sacred institutions?

Camus' novel is set in the Algerian city of Oran in the 1940s. When thousands of rats and a few humans begin to mysteriously die in the city, the protagonist Dr. Bernard Rieux is spooked, and after consulting with a colleague, he concludes that the city has the plague. Rieux builds a small team of colleagues and together they try to convince the local government officials of the danger. But as is the wont of some in government, the officials viewed the initial reports as a hoax. Only when the number of infections had grown, did they finally accept the facts and begin to act. They locked down the city. Dr. Rieux, as Camus says, does what he can to care for patients; and people in the town responded in many ways to their new reality: some panicked, some hunkered down, some continued to go out and enjoy the weather and the sun, some resisted, some sat in disbelief "that a pestilence on [such] great scale could befall a town"; and some turned to religion; and when they did, writes Camus, they went to listen to the local priest, Father Paneloux, deliver a homily about the crisis. The priest foolishly blamed the people for the crisis, saying God sent the plague because they needed to repent. Albert Camus was no friend of religion, and his portrayal of the priest was intended to show, from Camus' perspective, how irrelevant religion is to daily life, especially in a crisis, by showcasing the very worst response that a clergy-person can have during a time of uncertainty by blaming the whole thing on the people. Camus instead lifts up Dr. Rieux as the real hero. The good doctor, as Camus says, had no time to spend on the big questions of why the plague had come or who was to blame for it. Instead, says Camus, Dr. Rieux spent his days *with* those who were suffering.

Camus' novel is a brilliant portrayal of the many ways humans respond to a crisis - from panic to isolation, from disbelief to resistance to seeking answers that try to make sense of it all to living more compassionately *with* neighbors and friends. In a recent blog post, writer Gareth Higgins describes one way we could all live more compassionately at this time. He writes: "The corona virus situation does not have to be another manifestation of the story of separation, selfishness, and scapegoating which our shared culture often promotes. I've already seen examples," he says, "of people expressing concern for their neighbors, sharing what we have instead of hoarding for ourselves alone, making creative decisions about how to connect with each other. In short - doing for and with others what we would want them to do for and with us." "My friend Bill had a brilliant idea," says Higgins. "He printed out a letter and delivered it to his neighbors. It said ... :

*'Hi Neighbors - I'm sorry it took a health scare to get us to reach out, but here we are. So if anyone gets sick and needs anything, please don't hesitate to call. My number is ***-***-**** - if you need groceries or supplies and are stuck at home; we will happily leave it on your doorstep and see you when you're better. Hopefully it won't happen, of course - but if it does, we are more than happy to help.'*"

A story of compassion - a compassionate way to be *with* our neighbors, like Dr. Rieux in Camus' novel. There's a paradox in such a response. We're being told by health authorities to practice "social distancing" - keeping separated from each other, staying home instead of

going out, being *physically* distant. But Bill's letter to his neighbors, paradoxically, is a way to be *physically* separated yet *compassionately* connected. Let me read his letter again:

*'Hi Neighbors - I'm sorry it took a health scare to get us to reach out, but here we are. So if anyone gets sick and needs anything, please don't hesitate to call. My number is ***-***-**** - if you need groceries or supplies and are stuck at home; we will happily leave it on your doorstep and see you when you're better. Hopefully it won't happen, of course - but if it does, we are more than happy to help.'*

Safe distancing but compassionate connecting.

I wonder if we could read today's lectionary story from the Gospel of John along these lines. Today's story is one of my favorites in the gospels, because it's such a beautiful example of Jesus doing what Jesus does best: showing compassion to a broken person. The story begins with Jesus feeling tired and thirsty. And he stops to rest near a well as his disciples head into town to get some food. The presence of a Jewish rabbi sitting near a well in the heat of the day startles a Samaritan woman who was there to draw water. The implication in the story is that this woman deliberately goes to the well when no one else is around - midday, when it's hottest outside. And the implication in the story is that she practices this social-distancing because she has to. She's an outcast; and no one wants to be seen with her. It's only later in the story that we find out why: she's been in and out of relationships for years; and in the conservative religious culture of the day this meant she was under God's judgment. There was, at the time, almost a superstition around this theology: if you associated with someone like her, *you* might get infected with her misfortune; so people kept their social distance from her.

But Jesus stays compassionately close to her. He asks her for a drink and starts up a conversation, using the water from the well as an illustration of the living water he can give, which, he says, will bubble up to eternal life. When the disciples return from town, they are, says John, "astonished that [Jesus] was speaking with [her]" - a woman with a checkered past, a *Samaritan* woman. Jews and Samaritans didn't get along back then, because of their ethnic and religious differences. But Jesus in the gospels just ignores these petty differences, and the walls we humans erect to distance ourselves from each other. And he behaves this way because *every* person matters to him. *Every* person *is* a person, a human being, a child of God, worthy of love and compassion. Jesus used her social distancing as an opportunity to connect with her in compassion. I love the way this story ends. The woman has been transformed, renewed, revived, invigorated. She becomes bigger, larger, more alive after her conversation with Jesus. And she rushes into town and starts talking to everyone about this rabbi she just met. Her isolation and social distancing became community and connection. And she became more fully human as a result.

Richard Rohr has written that the role of the church - especially in times of crisis - is to make people "bigger" in this way. "God is always bigger than you imagined or expected or even hoped for," he writes. "When you see people going to church and becoming smaller instead of larger," he says, "you have every reason to question whether the practices or sermons or sacraments or liturgies are opening them to an authentic God Experience." Such a God Experience, he says, "will feel like a new freedom to love, and you wonder where it comes from. Why do I have this new desire, this new capacity to love new people, to love the old people better, maybe to enter into some kind of new love for the world? I will find," he says,

“that even my thoughts are more ... loving, patient, and compassionate,” because I am “*participating* in something larger than [myself].”

Maybe the common crisis we all face now can be an opportunity for us to become larger instead of smaller. We have to keep *physically* distant, but might we become more compassionately connected? Compassionately connected like Dr. Rieux in Camus’ novel; compassionately connected like Bill in the letter to his neighbors. Maybe this common crisis can enlarge our faith, make our hearts bigger, our empathy deeper. And maybe we’ll find, as Richard Rohr says, a “new capacity to love new people, to love the old people better, [and] to enter into some kind of new love for the world.”

Let me close this morning with words written this week by Reverend Lynn Ungar about how we might become larger during this uncertain time:

“What if you thought of it as the Jews consider the Sabbath - the most sacred of times? Cease from travel. Cease from buying and selling. Give up, just for now, on trying to make the world different than it is. Sing. Pray. Touch only those to whom you commit your life. Center down. And when your body has become still, reach out with your heart. Know that we are connected in ways that are terrifying and beautiful. (You could hardly deny it now.) Know that our lives are in one another’s hands. (Surely, that has become clear.) Do not reach out your hands. Reach out your heart. Reach out your words. Reach out all the tendrils of compassion that move, invisibly, where we cannot touch. Promise this world your love - for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, so long as we all shall live.” Amen.