

"Socially Distanced"

Genesis 40:1-23; John 19:25-27

Please note that my sermon title "Socially Distanced" is drawn from the present day term associated with our nation's response to covid-19 that frustrates some of us to a considerable degree. "Remember to keep your social distance," we are reminded, "be sure and keep at least 6' apart." Though there is a true sense of the rightness of this practice, it nevertheless grates on some of us as there is something inherently wrong about being forced to do so. The human creature is not only a relational creature in a generic and general sense but a creature that thrives on and even craves the physical touch. But to this and a corollary we will return later.

I want to begin by noting that if we are intending to draw deeply upon the experience and emotional situation of a Biblical character it is important to zero in as much as possible into the character's situation and circumstances, particularly their life story and time line. This is why I used a fairly large slice of Scripture, namely all of Genesis chapter 40. On the other hand, as may be evident from our Gospel lesson, sometimes a little snippet will do.

Here is a succinct overview of Joseph's life story. He is the favorite son of his father, Jacob (also referred to as Israel) who his not-so-favorite 11 brothers initially sought to murder him because of his favored status and his audacity in telling them about two dreams which inferred that they all would bow down and submit to him, but who, in the end, sold him into slavery to a transient trading group who then carried Joseph off to Egypt. Thus, one would think that Joseph would most likely have hated his murderous and treacherous brothers. Many years pass but Joseph finds himself not only in the good graces and employ of Pharaoh but in fact elevated in status and power second only to Pharaoh himself. In spite of the sordid family story, God has smiled warmly on Joseph and Joseph knows it. Joseph also knows that God has given him the ability to interpret dreams. God is with Joseph and Joseph is faithfully serving Pharaoh, king of Egypt. And then the unthinkable happens, as told in chapter 39 - another horrendous reversal of fortune.

The wife of Potiphar, the captain of the guard, tries to seduce Joseph but to no avail. Over and over it happens, with the pressure mounting with every next illicit and immoral advance. But God, it seems, has kept Joseph from giving in to the unthinkable. Inexplicably, Joseph finds himself falsely accused of rape, convicted and imprisoned, surely wondering if his life is once again about to be snuffed out. The Biblical text is perfectly clear. Potiphar burned with anger. This almost seems to intimate certain death for Joseph, perhaps even a slow agonizing one.

And yet, Joseph sees God's hand being with him even in prison. His hope is not gone, nor is his willingness to be a help and a hand wherever opportunity could be found. At whatever risk to himself, the prison warden initially looked upon Joseph with favor. Joseph thus took it upon himself to honor the warden's trust and thus look after the prisoners, seemingly, with kindness and a proper sense of their humanity. Thus, it seems that no matter the evil that is done to Joseph, he does not charge God with evil but understands that man is

responsible for evil that is done. Inexplicable to some, but understandable to those of us who understand the nature of God and the nature of man, Joseph is the scapegoat for evil in the world, the innocent one upon whom the many evils of the world is forced upon. In this sense, then Joseph is a Messiah figure in the OT. Joseph is a prototype of Jesus who is to come a couple of millennia later. Joseph did not succumb to doing evil even though it might cost his life. And just as importantly, he trusted God fully through it all.

One other feature is critical here. God had not only sent a couple of seemingly bizarre dreams to Joseph, God had given him the power to interpret dreams. From our story, Joseph notes that only God has the power to interpret dreams. Thus, when he interprets the dreams for the cupbearer and baker he is acknowledging that God, as the source of interpretation, is the one actually interpreting them, and that is because God sent the dreams in the first place.

What I'm getting at is that Joseph is the lone good guy but against whom all the forces of Satan is thrown. So, with this larger picture in mind let us consider one key feature of the story and how that relates to us today. In the interpretation Joseph says, "Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison." (Genesis 40:13-14, NIV) Surely, we would think, the cupbearer would do a favor in return for Joseph's favorable interpretation of the dream. We, today, believe that there is an inherent rule of reciprocity in civil society. If someone does you a favor or good deed, it is assumed and even expected that it be reciprocated if and when possible. But, as fitting with the over all story, the cupbearer is restored to his royal role as cupbearer but then forgets Joseph. Though we are not told, one wonders if the cupbearer forgets because is simply so incredibly relieved to not having had his head removed. In any case, there is Joseph, simply forgotten. One wonders what Joseph thought about humanity in general. One wonders about the isolation he experienced, particularly in that there had been a glimmer of hope in terms of the cupbearer but only to have that glimmer dissipate into thin air like a cheap morning fog. If we read into the next verse following our OT lesson we learn that Joseph continues to languish in prison for another two years.

It was not by accident that I titled my sermon "Socially Distanced". It was by virtue of the various vicissitudes, wild swings, fortunes and misfortunes of Joseph's life that he was socially distanced. It was not by his choice but by the actions and attitudes of everybody he had contact with. This is not totally unlike our circumstances today. As all of us have experienced these emotions and realities these past 5 months now, covid-19 is responsible for a variety of ways in which we have been socially distanced. It is true that in one sense we have voluntarily distanced ourselves from others, that is, we have chosen to take what some understand to be prudent action in terms of health and safety. And yet, it also is true that we wish we didn't have to take these measures.

I want to share with you all something of which you probably don't know nor have heard. Our Session, our board of Ruling Elders, has not only recently

become concerned about our connectedness. Our Elders' concerns for our church is not reserved primarily for Youth Group. One of the things we discussed at our last Session meeting was our concern for our connectedness and the manner in which we have been and are able to still be in direct spiritual and relational contact with one another. But this concern is not simply of recent concern.

Approximately a year ago, some 5 months before we'd ever heard of coronavirus and Covid-19, your Elders and I were talking, brain-storming, about ways in which we might be better and fuller relationship both with each other as the body of Christ and in terms of our community. As a result of our brain-storming and on-going conversations about this topic we put together last fall a plan to be initiated this past spring. Interestingly, our planned time of implementation just happened to have coincided with the now well-known lock down of our nation - this past April.

Our plan was to have a church couple, family, or individual host an evening dinner and get together, not to involve other family of which they are in regular contact with, but involving non-family members of our community, particularly those who are not members of the church. This plan was not intended to be focused primarily on how to get people on board, so to speak, as in church membership. It was not a new member campaign strategy. The single most important point was that we simply engage our fellow community members. There are more ways to be "socially distanced" than we probably have understood. Even in small communities, there are those of whom we don't know as well as we think we do. And others, I believe, probably do not know us as fully as they think they do.

One of the good things that has come about by virtue of covid-19 is that more people are simply picking up the phone and calling on others simply because they haven't been able to see them in person. This has been a wake up call to realize that we often take our connectedness for granted. It also tells us to be careful and not neglect our relationships with others. The sense of isolation and that "nobody seems to care" is harmful to both individuals and to the overall health of a community, even a small farming community like ours. Any sense of isolation and the idea that nobody cares may not hit everyone, nor everyone in the same manner, but it is something we surely ought to think about carefully.

It is this idea of isolation and the idea that nobody seems to care is what prompted me to select our OT lesson for today. I'd never before preached a sermon on this passage but it seems to be clearly appropriate.

There is a small danger in thinking about this, that is, there is a small danger in terms of mis-application. Quite often, when this topic is raised and considered, it is mis-applied in that people take up the effort to be in better contact with others but in terms of those whom they know well and see fairly often. This is to misunderstand the intent and purpose.

The point is to prayerfully think about those with whom you do not have frequent, or any, contact. But let us not overlook another aspect of this. This applies to both those who have formerly been associated with the church and those who never have, and with whom we have had no contact for a long time.

Of course we have to be honest enough to say that there is some truth to the idea that we would be delighted to see non-churched folks become disciples of Jesus. But that is not our primary interest and hope here.

Behind every curtain of reality in any given community there is some sense of reality that often goes unseen. Our community on the surface seems pretty homogenous and doing pretty well in terms of getting along with one another. There is some sense of the same within the church. But we must not forget that there ARE those in our community, both in terms of the church and in terms of the local community, who are in some sense feeling like Joseph. There are those who have been socially distanced, for both reasons we can know and understand and reasons of which we don't know and/or can't know.

The question is rightly, and most appropriately, asked if our Session has given any thought to the nature of these things in our present day. The simple fact is that, yes, we have given considerable thought and engaged in brain storming as to the nature of our reality and what to do about it. It is both ironic and sad that the very time we were planning to begin implementing these in-home meal gatherings, we were forcibly locked down, "socially distanced" by order of our governing authorities. There is no small truth to our correlation with Joseph's future time line. Many of us today are asking, "How long will the restraints and constraints be forced upon us?" For Joseph, it would be another 2 years before things would change for him. I dread the thought of our present circumstances continuing for another 2 years.

And yet, we are not as bound and limited as we may think. But before I proceed with that we need to take a look at our Gospel lesson.

In Jesus' time a widow, or any woman without some sort of male head of household, was at significant risk in terms of poverty and a number of health and life debilitations. From all that we know from Scripture, Joseph is no longer in the picture. Whether from death or any other factor, we don't know what happened to him. He simply is gone from the picture. Thus, Joseph, it assumed, has fulfilled the role his earthly father had earlier filled. Now with Jesus at the point of death, Jesus issues one of his last directives before he dies. To his mother Jesus said, indicating "the disciple whom Jesus loved," "Dear Woman, here is your Son." And to the disciple whom Jesus loved he said in reference to Mary, "Here is your mother." Let us not overlook a key point of the succinct text. This is nothing less than a directive, though couched in softer terms than the way directives are usually understood. Jesus was not dismissing the traditional notion, understanding, or social framework of what constitutes biological family and family relationships as some have suggested. Jesus was not overturning the God-given understanding of family relationships. What he did was expand it. Embedded in the laws of the universe which God created is the truth that what constitutes "family" is NOT limited to or by biology. And from that time "this disciple took her into his home."

Framing it in our present day circumstance Jesus was not about to let his beloved mother, Mary, be "socially distanced" by the terrible circumstances she found herself in.

If and when we, today, keep ourselves connected only with biological family, then we have overlooked a significant part of what it means to be social family.

As I was pondering these very words it occurred to me that if and when we realize we have been remiss in maintaining our connectedness that realization tends to frightens us as it shames us. That realization tells us that there are only two options. The first option is to let that fear and shame keep us from reaching out as we should have in the first place. One fear is the possibility that the people we finally reach out to will be less than receptive in the sense of "what took you so long?" Thus, we let that or other related fears keep us from fulfilling what Jesus is saying to us.

The second option, of course, is to put that fear aside and simply do what we should do - in perhaps terms of a former telephone company commercial, "Reach out and touch someone." Being socially distanced in some ways does not mandate being socially distanced in other ways. It is not an all or none. This is what our Session has been pondering and trying to work through over the past year.

Thursday as I was mulling over application it came to mind that with us featuring worship not only in our sanctuary and via parking lot broadcast, it also is true that there is the possibility of other folks "out there" who might come into contact with this message, however accidental or intentional. It occurred to me that there could be folks who are not Christian who are hearing this message. It could be that this message finds itself in the hands and hearts of some who have no religious persuasion. I believe the message fits for all of us whether we have Christian faith, or are of a different religious persuasion, or who claim no faith tradition.

There is a universal quality to this message. The ultimate point is that the human creature is designed with the irreducible and unavoidable need for social contact. It is as much a part of our human nature as our genetic DNA that is found in every living cell of the body. The social distancing of which has so beleaguered and stultified the human population around the globe wherever it exists, affects everybody regardless of religious persuasion. But less us never accept the totally false notion that we can't do anything about it. We can and we should, wouldn't you agree?

Let us not let failures and inadequacies of the past hinder us and preclude us from doing what we are called to do, whether from a Christian or non-Christian perspective. One thing that transcends religious boundaries is the fact that all human beings, however much we let evil exist in our world, and even put evil into play in our world, nonetheless basically want our world to be a better world. Let us do something about it. This, it would seem, was part of Jesus' intent in some of his final words to John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. It is Jesus' message to us as well. Amen.