



Lent 3A 3/15/2015

*Bridging the Gap*

The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Church, Needham MA

1

*Oh Lord, may your word only be spoken; and may your word only be heard. In the name of Jesus Christ, the living Word. Amen.*

Social Distancing: It has become a nearly sacred, life-giving mantra over the past few days, as we navigate the silent menace of the coronavirus. The practice of social distancing is what protects life, as we know, by keeping people at least 3 to 6 feet apart. That span prevents the virus from riding sneeze and cough droplets the distance from victim to victim—it hits the floor before landing on its hoped-for target.

I find the phrase so unfortunate. And yet, in one sense, in an ironic way, it describes exactly how our culture has been recently shaping itself, even including the pivotal medical and social moment in which we currently find ourselves.

Social distance is precisely what is evidenced in our politics, in our cultural conversations and practices, in the deep-seated and contemptuous aversions that political and cultural groups are having for one another.

Social distancing has been one of the durable threads in the social fabric of our history. To take just one example, in the relationships between blacks and whites, for instance, social distancing has been the practice in the Republic since before our founding, the close proximity and richly complicated and not so-secretly intertwined lives of blacks and whites notwithstanding. Slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the prison-industrial complex are concrete aspects of this social distancing.

And, more broadly, by many measures, the distance between the haves and havenots in our country is growing wider and wider.

The Gospel this morning illuminates this sense of social distancing in Jesus' world. And it shows Jesus bridging it.

First: Jesus has taken the trouble to travel in Samaria with his disciples. As the text itself tells us, Samaritans and Jews did not associate with one another. The Bible and other sources chronicle the ancient social, religious, and political reasons for their animosity.

Second: Jesus initiates an encounter with a woman, alone, in public. Not usually done in his world.

Third: The encounter took place at noon. Water was usually drawn from wells in the cool of the morning or evening. And usually in groups of women. As we can surmise from the thrust of their conversation, it seems possible that the woman's complicated past with men may have led to shunning by her community.

Fourth: Jesus not only asks her for water, he engages her in conversation that goes to the very heart of the matter—beyond her relationship with men to her relationship with God, though she doesn't quite follow him there. (Just as we often don't quite follow him there.)

A quadruple distancing: A Samaritan, a woman, alone, under a social cloud.

By the end of the dialogue, the Jesus has bridged the distance not only between himself and the woman but has laid the foundation for bridging the gap between her people and God.

The love of Jesus is always turning things upside down. He turned the relationship between that Samaritan village and God upside down.

He turns upside down the language we use to describe the practice of love that is necessary in times like ours. That love makes possible, it *demand*s, that we use our imaginations and energy and prayer.

That's kind of what is happening with the phrase social distancing. Though it sounds bad, it's actually good. I wish there were a better words to capture its essence.

The new social distancing undermines the old social distancing. Because it forces us to put ourselves in the place of the vulnerable or disagreeable "Other."

In our cultural and medical moment: It's tempting for healthy people to think—I'm fine. I'm in no danger. Why should my life be disrupted?

But we're asked to think of the vulnerable "Other."

In Biblical terms, I think of St. Paul writing to the Romans about the varying religious practices of the fragile early Christian community. Paul felt free to do a variety of things. But because his freedom made some of the young and less established in the faith feel uncertain, Paul practices restraint.

And so, he writes, "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall." (Romans 14.20-21)

Or I think of Paul writing to the Corinthians about the Body of Christ, and how "its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (1 Corinthians 12.25b-27)



Lent 3A 3/15/2015

*Bridging the Gap*

The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Church, Needham MA

3

Paul is writing about the Church; but in our civic context, we need to hear it applying not just to the Church. These passages point to our roles as salt and light in the body politic.

Finally, to put all this another way: I quote from a piece by Yosef Kanefsky, Rabbi at B'nai David-Judea, a Modern Orthodox congregation in Los Angeles, recently published in the Jewish magazine Forward. It goes like this:

“But I’d humbly suggest that we use the term [Social Distancing] itself sparingly, if at all. Language is a powerful shaper of thinking. And the very last thing we need right now, is a mindset of mutual distancing. We actually need to be thinking in the exact opposite way: Every hand that we don’t shake must become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise. Let’s stay safe. And let’s draw one another closer in a way that we’ve never done before.”

<https://forward.com/opinion/441490/coronavirus-is-a-test-for-the-government-but-its-a-test-for-us-too/>

That’s my prayer for all of us, and, I believe, our prayer for one another in our best selves. That we learn how to practice the love that brings us closer, rather than separates us.

Amen.