

## Social Distance vs. Spiritual Connections

A sermon written in response  
to the cancellation of church services  
Sunday, March 15, 2020  
Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

What a week it's been. On Tuesday, the staff was all about business as usual. On Wednesday, we had heard that some places were closing, but by Thursday, everything had changed. Everything. Schools shut down, businesses, major sporting events, and we, your staff, were crowded around a table wondering what to do about service on Sunday morning. It was clear the sermon I had planned had to be scrapped – but the question on the table was – should we close the building and suspend our worship services for a time?

Although I had not said it out loud, I thought to myself – which one of our beloved members would we be willing to lose in order to stay open? The answer was of course – no one. Not one. It was unanimous among all of us that for safety's safe – we had to close. And while I've heard some naysayers on my facebook feed say “we lose more people to tuberculosis worldwide than this flu,” the evidence is out there – that this is a virus unlike one we've seen before. Our immune systems are vulnerable – there is no vaccine – and given all the evidence we've seen in China and Italy – we cannot be too cautious in this time of worry and concern.

So – we're doing all we can, right? We're washing our hands until they are cracked and dry; we're wiping down surfaces with disinfectant – but the single most important thing that we're being told to slow the spread of this virus is “social distancing.” It's a term I haven't heard before; maybe it was invented to accompany this virus. But you all now are intimately familiar with what this means. It means stay away from other people. Avoid the common social niceties which are so routine -- handshake, a hug, maybe even a kiss. And if you have kids – forget it – they are hugging and sneezing and coughing and slobbering over each other and other adults. It's really hard not to hug a sick child. It's hard not to hold the hand of a beloved elder for fear of making them sick. It's hard not to want to greet people we know and love warmly and with affection.

This national crisis has changed us – and will continue to change us – in ways we can't even fathom yet. But what's happening now has happened before; not this particular virus, but nation-wide events which affect the entire country and, in fact, the world. As a country we've faced crisis before, September 11<sup>th</sup> and World War II. We talk about how, during World War II, the nation was united in sacrifice; people gladly gave up conveniences and luxuries for a greater cause; there was a sense of “we'll get through this together” But something that David Brooks said, , who was interviewed on the PBS Newshour this week, caught my attention, he said this:

“I have spent the last week reading about pandemics in the past. And they're not good for social trust. People go into them thinking, I'm going to be a good soldier and citizen for people around me.

But when the fear gets going, they stop seeing each other. They stop caring about each other. They stop volunteering.

I have always wondered why the 1918 Spanish Flu that happened here killed 675,000 Americans. And it left no trace on the national culture. And I have always wondered, why was that?

And reading about what it was like, people were ashamed of how they behaved, because they looked after themselves. And that's understandable. Fear is just this terrible thing. And we haven't really been hit by the raw, gut-wrenching fear of seeing hospitals overwhelmed and stuff like — but we will.

And we sort of need to take moral steps and social steps, as well as we take health steps, to sort of mitigate that.”

So, I think we all know the things we need to do to keep ourselves and others in our community physically safe. Unless we are a front-line responder – the nurses, nurses aides, physicians, and all other health-care providers, we will keep a physical distance from one another. And if you are listening or watching to this and you are a front line responder – please know that your ministers are here for you – to listen to you – to support you because you are carrying a terrible extra burden of care for us.

But we cannot – we must not – keep a moral or spiritual distance from one another. In fact, we have to forge even more intentional spiritual connections. Sometimes we take one another for granted; assuming that people we love or institutions we care about will always be there – because – well, they always have. Times like these do remind us of how precarious life is – and magnifies our fears that one misplaced cough or sneeze can change our life – or the life of a beloved – for a long time.

We can also make spiritual connections in other ways – to nature. We can walk or stroll or roll under great trees who have seen panics come and go; we can put our hands in the earth and plant things that will flower later in the year; or even next season; we can sit down in the peace of wild things and find strength and support for the days ahead. These spiritual connections are also important

Regardless of when this pandemic ends – and it will end – we can't focus on what we can't do. We may not be able to hug a friend, but we can call or zoom or text them. We can write letters. We can send postcards. We can Zoom friends all over the world now. We can reinforce connections; we can make new ones. What we can't do is lose who we are – we can't lose our values – or moral center – our desire to help – our willingness to transcend self-interest for the common good. We can't let our fears make us less than human; instead, we must encourage ourselves and each other to be MORE fully human; more loving, more patient, more generous and more kind through these very hard times.

I always say the best sermons are the ones I preach to myself – so please know that I too, am with you in this struggle. I'm worried too. I'm not reassured by our current administration's handling of this crisis and because of that, I've lost my faith in what government can do. But I haven't lost faith in you – or in us – or in what we can and will do together. Maintaining our spiritual connections in times of social distance is the only thing, besides washing my hands twenty times a day – that I can do to keep the real virus – fear and panic – from landing in me.

Thanks for listening to me – and now, I want to hear from you.