

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

March 22, 2020 (4th Sunday in Lent, Year A)
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 4:1-41

I don't know about you, but I feel like I'm STARVING for a little human contact right now, to spend some TIME with someone, CLOSER than 6 feet away, to have a CONNECTION.

Two weeks ago, we NEVER would have believed this was possible. We took PEOPLE for GRANTED.

This "social distancing" is what we need to DO, what we MUST do. It's REQUIRED of us.

But we shouldn't CALL it SOCIAL distancing; we should call it PHYSICAL distancing. Before all this happened, even when it WASN'T REQUIRED, SOCIAL distancing was something we were actually CHOOSING to do. And I PRAY, when this is all OVER, that we will be CHANGED by this, that we won't go BACK – to EITHER form of distancing, physical OR social.

What is SOCIAL distancing? Let me give you an example. Have you noticed that a lot of OLD houses have FRONT porches? What were those FOR? People have BACK DECKS now, but there USED to be FRONT PORCHES. And I hear they actually used to SIT on them too. They used to sit out there on a rocking chair or a swing and watch the world go by. They used to wave and call out to people as they passed. And people actually used to STOP and say hello, and maybe even stay for DINNER. I know, crazy, right?!

But then the world got HURRIED. People zoomed by too FAST to NOTICE anyone waving. And they didn't have TIME to stop in anyway. So we just stayed INSIDE and watched TV. And when we DID go outside, we went to our BACK yard, so we could have our PRIVACY, behind our privacy FENCES. It almost seemed like we didn't want to be SEEN anymore.

But NOW we DO want to be seen and we DO want to be VISITED.

Here's another example. Had you noticed that it had gotten so that the question, "How are you doing?" didn't MEAN anything anymore?

There was an old TV commercial that illustrated this. There was this friendly COUNTRY fella that goes to a bar in New York City, and guys keep saying, "ow ya doin'." "ow ya doin'." And EVERY time he answers, "THANKS for askin'. I'm doin' FINE. I just got here today. My brother-in-law picked me up at the airport. MIGHTY BIG airport you all got here. And the people SURE are nice."

Of course, they WEREN'T actually ASKING. And the commercial makes FUN of the out-of-towner because he THINKS that it's a real question, and that the people actually WERE friendly. Personally, I thought the commercial was kind of a SAD, because the people really DIDN'T care.

It was a reflection of the world we live in. Even when someone says, "So, how you been?" or "How are things going?", usually they don't REALLY want to know. So, even if we're having an AWFUL day, a TERRIBLE day, even if it's the WORST day of our life, we say, "I'm fine." Is it any WONDER that we keep how we're REALLY doing, how we really FEEL to ourselves? And so we hide ourselves.

But it goes DEEPER than that. We hide our REAL selves from one another, and from GOD. We wear MASKS, put up a good FRONT, so no one will know what we're REALLY FEELING.

We don't hide because we want to; we hide because we feel like we NEED to—to PROTECT ourselves. Being exposed to the light is DANGEROUS. Revealing WHO we really are and how we really FEEL is DANGEROUS, because ALL of us, even the BEST of us, have a place way down DEEP where there's a DARKNESS, a place that we keep locked away. It's where we keep our FEAR. It's where we keep our secrets. It's where we keep the memories that are just too PAINFUL to share. It's where we keep the emotions that are too AWFUL to bear, where we keep the things we can't TELL ANYONE. We're afraid that if we REVEAL them, it might show our WEAKNESS, or the emotions might be too

intense and OVERWHELM us, or we're simply ashamed. So we BURY them WAY down deep, where we won't have to DEAL with them, and no one will EVER KNOW about them.

And this is the world we were CHOSING for ourselves. At least until 2 weeks ago, when a pandemic came and PHYSICALLY separated us from each other. NOW...now we're starting to UNDERSTAND how TERRIBLY, TERRIBLY WRONG we were. Now, we REALLY DO want to know how you're doing, how you're FEELING, how you're HANDLING all this. And I hope that we don't LOSE that again.

This is where our Lord MEETS us today. The man born blind in our story needed to be HEALED. But it was MORE than a PHYSICAL handicap; he carried a TERRIBLE SHAME. In the first century, most people believed that ALL suffering was the result of sin. There was even one school of thought that a person could sin prior to BIRTH, while still in the mother's WOMB. So his blindness was considered a PUNISHMENT for either HIS or his PARENTS' sin. Either way, people looked DOWN on him. The Pharisees dismissed him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" But it's not just the PHARISEES. Even the well-intentioned DISCIPLES asked, "Who sinned, this blind man or his parents?"

Jesus said, "NEITHER." The very BASIS of the question was false. He NEVER answered those kinds of questions. Instead of TALKING ABOUT him, he ACTED – he saw the blind man's NEED, and he HEALED him. He said, "I am the light of the world." And as a SIGN of his LIFE-CHANGING light, he gave sight to a man living in darkness.

And I LOVE the way he did it. It says, "He spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on (his) eyes." EW! It's GROSS, it's DISGUSTING – but it's REAL. Every OTHER time Jesus heals someone, he stays squeaky clean. Often, he doesn't even TOUCH the person. But Jesus gets DIRTY to help THIS man. I like that. It shows that Jesus will do WHATEVER it takes to make us WHOLE again. The mud reminds us of creation, when God made us from the dust of the earth. God gets PERSONALLY INVOLVED. When Jesus used that MUD, he was RE-CREATING this man.

In Ephesians, Paul writes, "Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light" (vs. 8). Now, did you notice that he didn't say, "Once you were IN darkness, but now in the Lord you are IN light"? No, he said, "Once you WERE darkness, but now in the Lord you ARE light." There's a PROFOUND difference there. He's saying that in Christ, we not only live IN the light, we BECOME the light. When we bare OUR darkness to the light of Christ, we are CLEANSED. We're washed CLEAN. We are RE-CREATED in Christ's image. We're made HOLY.

This is a GIFT – because KEEPING things LOCKED up inside is a TERRIBLE burden. You know that expression, "They have a heavy heart"? Well, keeping our emotions bottled up MAKES the heart heavy. It's EXHAUSTING. To paraphrase Gerald May, an addiction expert (in *Addiction and Grace*), "We are only as sick as our secrets."

But God offers us grace. Jesus WILLINGLY LIFTS our burdens. He WANTS to TAKE our burdens. He wants us to be FREE. In Christ, we can FINALLY let the FEAR, and the pain, and the anger, and the sadness go.

I want to share with you a poem a friend e-mailed a few years ago. It's called "God's Boxes."

I have in my hands two boxes
Which God gave me to hold.
He said, "Put all your sorrows in the black box,
And all your joys in the gold."

I heeded His words, and in the two boxes
Both my joys and sorrows I stored.
But though the gold became heavier each day
The black was as light as before.

With curiosity, I opened the black,
I wanted to find out why,
And I saw, in the base of the box, a hole
Which my sorrows had fallen out by.

I showed the hole to God, and mused,
"I wonder where my sorrows could be."
He smiled a gentle smile and said,
"My child, they're all here with me."

I asked God why He gave me the boxes,
Why the gold, and the black with the hole?
"My child, the gold is for you to count your blessings,
The black is for you to let go."

In the midst of all the TERRIBLE news this week, there have ALSO been stories of BLESSINGS, of JOYS SHARED. Italians are singing to each other from their balconies. In Spain, a physical trainer ran a fitness class from his ROOFTOP, so people could SEE him and EXERCISE on their balconies. I read about a couple who ate at Irma's restaurant in Houston and left a \$9400 tip for the entire STAFF to feed THEIR families. I heard about a fast food place down South that DELIVERED food to exhausted grocery store workers. I heard about places that offered FREE lunches to truck drivers. I saw pictures of people visiting their grandmas and grandpas through the WINDOW of their nursing home. I saw bus drivers right HERE in Aitkin delivering food to the kids at home. And I saw volunteers here at FIRST LUTHERAN taking community meals out to people in the parking lot, and keeping the food SHELF going by filling emergency boxes. And the stories go on, and on, and on.

And EVERY ONE of these joys and blessings was a moment when someone WAS the light, SHINING their light into the darkness.

Laura Kelly Fanucci wrote THIS a few days ago:

When this is over,
May we never gain
Take for granted
A handshake with a stranger
Full shelves at the store
Conversations with neighbors
A crowded theater
Friday night out
The taste of communion
A routine checkup
The school rush each morning
Coffee with a friend
The stadium roaring
Each deep breath
A boring Tuesday
Life itself

When this ends,
May we find
That we have become
More like the people

We wanted to be
We were called to be
We hoped to be
And may we stay
That way – better
For each other
Because of the worst.

This crisis has reminded how DEEPLY we NEED one another. We're HUMAN, we are ALL BROTHERS and SISTERS, and we need to TALK to somebody.

So REALLY, "How ARE you doing?" In CHRIST, we actually want to KNOW. As Christians we are called to LISTEN. WE listen because JESUS listens.

He SHINES HIS light into our darkness and says, "Once YOU were darkness, but now in the Lord you ARE LIGHT." May it be so. May you BE a light. May you BE one of those joys and blessings in God's boxes. May you BE the one who CALLS someone up this week and REMINDS them that SOMEONE still CARES about them. And THROUGH you, that JESUS LOVES them.

REALLY, how ARE you? Amen.