



Social Distancing

TEXT
Philippians 1:3-7

March 15, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Well, I learned a new term this week: Social Distancing. As an introvert, I thought I have the skills needed for this. But even for the most extreme introverts, social distancing soon begins to feel like isolation. Add to that the cancellation of sporting events, so stuck at home and no basketball to watch; in the ancient world, they would consider this being smote by the gods!

There is a corona virus that is spreading. We can't see it, so we become cautious. There is an anxiety virus spreading, and we can see that — in empty grocery store shelves, in a shortened night's sleep, in pacing around wondering what to do with your time.

We at Village are practicing social distancing, because we love you and we want you to be healthy. It is our prayer that if enough of us in our city practice social distancing for a necessary season, then fewer of our neighbors will get sick.

This behavior is new to us, but social distancing is not new. The apostle Paul knew about social distancing. There is some of Paul that I find pretty hard to take. He's arrogant, and he

sometimes says things that I find shockingly out of touch. Some of that is Paul, some of that is me, but most of that is the 2,000 years that lie between us. In many ways, we don't live in the same world.

And yet, in some things, Paul has been a significant teacher for me.

In this particular letter, Paul writes from prison. He is jailed for his faith. He is cut off from the folks that he loves. Prison is social distancing in the extreme. Given that circumstance, we might expect Paul to be bitter or anxious or questioning his own faith.

But this letter is filled with joy. I don't know, were I in his circumstance, that I'd be that strong. But I want to be like Paul in this way, so I explore this letter to try to discern, where does that joy come from.

One thing I notice: Paul takes the long view. "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

The day of Jesus Christ: At Village, we call this God's promised day. It is the day when God brings to fulfillment all God intends, the day when all is redeemed.

It's heaven, but not in an individual way; it's the day when everything that has gone wrong is made right.

But Paul knows that we aren't there yet. Things are hard now. There is disease and oppression; for Paul, there is prison. He doesn't ignore the challenging realities of his life; but he doesn't let what has gone wrong define him, in part because he takes the long view.

There is a lot of talk in our time about being in the present, being mindful, living in the moment. There is great wisdom there. We should use this unusual season and discern what gifts it may have for us. We should be attentive to the present. But at the same time, it is important for us to take the long view. Recognize that what is happening right now will pass. Take the long view.

Ann Tyler's novel *The Accidental Tourist* opens with Macon and Sarah traveling home from a less than successful vacation to the beach. They left early. Macon was driving, and it was raining as they hit the small country roads that wander through the rural counties of the lowlands. The rain splatted against the windshield, and Sarah asked, "Can you see all right?"

“Yes, this is nothing,” he replied. It got a little harder. “I don’t know how you can possibly see. Maybe you should put on your glasses,” he said.

“My putting on my glasses will help you see?”

“Not me, you,” he said. “You are focused on the windshield. You need to look at the road.”¹

Sometimes we need to take the long view; it can be a source of comfort and even joy. Because I trust, no matter the circumstance today, there is a holy love that will never let us go and will bring us home. God is at work in and through us to bring comfort where there is pain, and hope where there is despair. Take the long view.

This time of social distancing is not easy, and it’s not enjoyable, but we will come through this. We will be OK.

But there is a second point I want you to notice in this letter.

Paul says, “I thank God for you because you hold me in your heart.” (Verse 7) That’s how it reads in my text — and maybe in your Bible as well — but some translations read, “I hold you in my heart.” You hold me, I hold you . . . the Greek text is not clear who is holding and who is being held. It can be read either way, and I think that’s the point. I think this is a place where Paul is intentionally ambiguous because both are true. They love each other; they care for each other.

Paul is intentionally remembering how important they are to one another, and it gives him strength; it gives him joy. Their faith in Jesus Christ has connected them to one another. They

share friendship, they share ministry, they share a hope for God’s promised day.

Caesar has put Paul in prison, but it is not what Caesar has done to Paul, it is what God has done for Paul that defines him.

And Caesar can remove Paul from his friends, from his church family, but Caesar cannot destroy what they mean to one another.

Let me invite you to do something today. Think about the people in your life who have inspired you in faith. Think about some people who have taught you what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Think about some people who have loved you into the faith. As Paul did, say a prayer of thanksgiving to God for them.

And maybe send them a text, or perhaps write an old-fashioned letter, to express gratitude.

In this season of social distancing, it can cause us to think that we are alone, but you are not. We are still family, and we care about you, and nothing changes that. And God is not tied to this room, but God is tied to you. There is absolutely no power that can pull you from God.

So, know that I thank God every time I remember you, for we hold each other in our hearts.

Social distancing may mean that you are by yourself for a while, but you are not alone.

¹Ann Tyler, *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), p. 4

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.