

**SERMON DELIVERED BY THE REVEREND JOHN C. DANFORTH
IN AN ON-LINE SERVICE OF ST. MARGARET'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA
DURING THE CORONA VIRUS SHUTDOWN
FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EASTER
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The first verses of today's Gospel, John 20:19-21, are scripture for all time, and especially for our time of social distancing.

It was the evening of Easter Day. The disciples were afraid for their lives, so they did what seemed sensible. They closed themselves in a room and locked the door behind them. As long as they were alone in that room, they would be safe. But the risen Lord wouldn't let them be alone. He came to them in the famous scene of doubting Thomas's confession, and he gave them instructions. They were to leave their room and go out into a dangerous world. He said, "As the father sent me, so I send you." So, they did. They left the room and faced the consequences they had feared. They spread the Gospel, but they suffered the terrible death of martyrs.

What does this story say to us in this Spring of COVID-19? As responsible citizens, we are concerned not just for our own safety but for our neighbors. We stay at home. When we must go out, we keep others at a distance. Communal worship, so integral to our religion is no more. The communion of saints is now the virtual church.

So for now, we are where we are—home alone. Our challenge is to make the most of our situation. So let's use this as an opportunity to contrast where we are in the present emergency with where we must be as disciples of our Lord. Let's take this as a wake-up call for the Church and a time to plan what the Church must be when COVID-19 is behind us. When this is over our ministry must be to leave our isolating rooms and connect with our neighbors. We must not let our present circumstances define us. A few weeks ago, a [Los Angeles Times](#) article had the title, "Could COVID-19 Make Isolation the New Normal?" We must not let that happen. The [Times](#) article points out that social distancing didn't start with the coronavirus. Long before COVID-19, isolation became our way of life. Technology allows us to be alone. Instead of going to the office, we can work at home. We avoid retail stores and order from Amazon. Netflix has replaced movie theaters. As early as 20 years ago, Harvard's Robert Putnam wrote a famous book, [Bowling Alone](#). The title makes the point. Instead of joining bowling leagues, we bowl alone. Sheltering in place has accelerated a trend that has been going on for some time. And the fact is that many of us rather enjoy being by ourselves.

But, and here is the point I want to make this morning: the consequences of social isolation mean that it must be our mission as Christians to overcome it.

Long before COVID-19, loneliness became an epidemic. A recent survey found that 61 percent of Americans are lonely. Twenty two percent of Millennials said that they had no friends at all. Zero. Loneliness affects our health. People who are lonely have greater risk of heart disease, stroke and dementia.

These are more than sad facts about individuals. Social isolation impacts society at large. Writing of COVID-19, columnist David Brooks has noted that pandemics drive people apart and overwhelm "the normal bonds of human affection."

Social isolation is a major reason for the sorry state of American politics. Members of Congress have self-isolated for years. Many leave their families in the district. Some sleep in their offices. The U.S. Senate was once called a "club." It's now the opposite. Members have little personal interaction except on the job. They don't know colleagues as husbands or wives or parents, only as political allies or opponents. One senator told me he couldn't think of five others he would invite to his house for

dinner. Social interaction, the lubricant that makes politics work is gone, and Congress, where policy is supposed to be made is dysfunctional.

The word now used to describe the state of politics is "tribal." We have isolated ourselves not just as individuals but as groups. In 2004, Barack Obama said, "There is not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America." Sixteen years later, that ringing statement of principle seems quaint.

For Christians, one point is so clear that I need not belabor it. Isolation is the antithesis of what our religion teaches. Genesis 2: When God created Adam, he said, "It is not good that man should be alone." God saw that creation was good. Loneliness was not good. We are commanded to love our neighbor, to care for the least among us, to make disciples, to leave the safety of our locked rooms. We say we believe in the communion of saints, the gathering of all God's people. We are supposed to be a healing power in the world. We are supposed to create shalom, wholeness. Isolation undermines the fundamentals of faithful living.

There's a wonderful practice in our liturgy, the exchange of the peace. The virus caused us to lay it aside temporarily, first for the elbow bump, now for complete separation. In it we turn to one another, often total strangers, and say, "The peace of the Lord be always with you." During this time of forced separation, let's focus on the peace and see it as what our ministry must be when this is over. And let's consecrate ourselves as a people who exchange the peace, not only within the walls of our sanctuaries, but with all kinds of neighbors, known and unknown.

Of course, we wouldn't use the same words on the outside that we use in church. We wouldn't accost people on the street and say, "The peace of the Lord be always with you." But we might say to a political opponent, "I am your friend." And we might find ways to let strangers know that we see them and that they are not alone.

Any enjoyment of private time that isolation affords us won't last, and it shouldn't. Most of us long for social interaction. Here are some examples.

My office is on the 19th floor of a building in St. Louis. Months before COVID-19 shut us down, I made it my mission to speak to people in the elevator. Most people aren't used to that. They're looking at their phones or staring ahead silently. In a minute or so there's not much of a conversation—just a word or two about the weather or the amount of work the other person is lugging home. But it is something, a recognition that the other person exists, a chance to share a minute together.

Here is what I have found. Other people, visibly weary from a day's work, are delighted to be recognized, if only for a moment. Their faces light up. They respond. They leave the elevator with, "Have a nice day," and sometimes, "God bless you."

Here's more evidence of ways we respond to isolation. At 7:00 each night, New Yorkers lean out of their apartment windows, bang pots and pans and cheer for healthcare workers. In my hometown, neighbors gather on the median of Utah Street, maintaining their distance of six feet but happy just to be with each other. In our Soulard neighborhood, a man stands on his balcony each evening and serenades passersby.

We long to be together. So when all of this is over, we disciples of Jesus will have our opening. The world will be waiting for us.

We must not let isolation be the new normal. We must do the work of bringing humankind together, the work of exchanging the peace.

And it will be work. We will have to make the effort to reach out to lonely people, to make those who are left out feel wanted, even to say a word to a stranger in an elevator. It would be easier not to make the effort and to mind our own business.

But, here's the point of today's Gospel. The disciples wanted to be left alone in their safe room, but Jesus wouldn't leave them to themselves. They couldn't lock him out. He came to them. And he insisted that they go into the world.

It's the same with you and me, his 21st Century followers. We would rather be left alone, maybe not in a locked room, but by turning inward. We'd rather sleep in or watch TV or work out in a gym or do almost anything but the work of discipleship. But Jesus won't leave us alone.

We sometimes hear that we must come to Jesus, but left to our own devices, we'd rather not. So Jesus doesn't wait for us to come to him. He comes to us wherever we are. Christ, the Hound of Heaven pursues us and he makes us act. He is present, and the door is in front of us. If we are his disciples, we must go through the door.