

Sermon: March 29th 2020 “When forgoing comfort is the cure” Rev. Steve Wilson

Today’s sermon is simply built to be the place where two truths come crashing together: The first, a fictional story of what earnest human connection right now could lead to, the second being the science behind our deep yearning to physically connect. These two stories don’t lean us in the direction of any one particular response to this pandemic. They don’t and won’t provide for you clear steps to take in the immediate future. The point of these stories is to serve as cairns. Cairns are the handmade markers hikers use to know if they are not too far off the right path. The next six weeks or more will provide its own take-home test that, with luck, only you will grade yourself on.

Our first story, or cairn, is about caution.

Whoever you are, whatever age you are or health status you might have, I want you to imagine that you just came down with the coronavirus. It is certainly possible. You have a couple of memories as to when you let your guard down and might have silently, without any fanfare or notice, absorbed the ominous talk of the town. Nevertheless, you’re hardly sure where or when this happened. What you know – and now everyone in your circle knows – is that on March 29th, later this afternoon, you became the 23rd case in your town. What you are also sure of is that this whole “thing,” as overwhelming as the news was, felt a little more abstract until, in an instant, it didn’t. You are poignantly aware that you can’t now press “pause” and undo your steps. There is no rewind button.

True to form, just yesterday, March 28th, you got a headache and a dry cough that will be pretty bad for a few days. You knew it was Covid-19 and not just a cold because you got sick just when test kits poured into the hospital. Let’s call it Torrance Memorial, for convenience. Although you were, of course, scared, and perhaps also a bit embarrassed, what happened was less dramatic than it could have been. At least to you. The diagnosis worse than the end result, at least physically. As it would turn out, you didn’t feel good for almost all of the upcoming week, but you never really felt awful! I want you to feel this. Take a second to take this experience in.

You might have been either too lucky or too healthy for the most dire of consequences to hit you. You were, as you will describe it when it has passed, “too lazy and/or too sick to get out of two different pairs of sweatpants and four t-shirts for nine days.” Luckily, with a guest room over the garage, you never once had to spend a night in the hospital.

Then, just about when you started to feel better, you discovered that all signs pointed to your being the person who likely passed this invisible silent little bomb on to one of your relatively new neighbors. It was, in truth, the first real conversation you had with the neighbor that lives just six doors down. This was Thursday, March 26th, just before sundown, as it turns out. Ironically, you probably wouldn’t have even had this encounter had you not both been home from work that week, walking the neighborhood on a warm Thursday looking for something to do. You remember not having felt much of anything wrong with you at the time.

Because you have re-traced the encounter in your head a few times now, you have come to

re-remember it well. You and your neighbor kept your six-foot distance at the start, but eventually the quality of the conversation and the refreshing nature of this new neighborly connection got the best of you. Both of you, you remind yourself and others. You remember it well. After walking half the block with this group of neighbors, mostly pretty spaced out, you were face to face in the driveway leaning on your car eating two little ice cream sundaes you pulled from the fridge. In hindsight, you were really pretty close for the entire ten minutes it took you to finish your “diet busters,” as you called them. You even shared a small pile of napkins you were proud to think of holding down with your windshield wiper.

Re-tracing the moment in your head over and over, you remember the two of you laughing a little about breaking the “social distancing” mandate. The conversation felt good. A new friend, it seemed. This person, not any older than you, but not quite as vital, ended up following a couple days behind your pattern of sickness. That is why most everyone thinks you gave it to them. Trouble is, as you turned the corner to health, they actually got sicker. They felt sick for two weeks; awful sick for more than a week. The neighborhood buzz people were reluctant to share with you was that your new friend felt deathly ill for about four of those days.

Mostly they, too, had to be quarantined at home, but when symptoms worsened, they had to spend six days in the hospital. The whole thing scared the family enough that they rushed to get a will pulled together and figure out who was going to be the medical proxy. Thank God, that ended up not being necessary.

For a lighthearted conversation over ice cream half the neighborhood witnessed, you were publicly thought to be the source. Thankfully, as of Easter weekend, so far, at least overtly, nobody has blamed you. Sadly, the story is not over.

What did happen, that you caught wind of from another neighbor, was that, at the hospital, the young aide who serviced your neighbor’s room for three of the six days they were there also got the virus. Nobody is, of course, sure how she got it, but your neighbor was the only Covid-19 patient, or social contact, this young gal had before she got sick. Fortunately, this aid, a woman in her early 20’s, was healthy – maybe too healthy, because before she got symptoms and was released to her own home quarantine, she, while working, is suspected to have passed it on to a patient who was in the hospital for a spleen rupture. He got pretty close to the edge but survived. Another unlucky, but dire, free roll of the dice on what you have sadly come to feel is your personal pathogen’s leapfrog-like life.

The saddest part of the story is that, before the nurse’s aide showed any real symptoms, she almost certainly passed the virus on to her grandmother. She didn’t live with her grandparents but visited almost daily. It is pretty clear that for the 11 days before she died at home, the 82 year old encountered nobody but her granddaughter and the paperboy – who never came down with any symptoms. The grandmother wasn’t tested until nearly the day she died. This story was, of course, told and re-told around the neighborhood in hushed tones.

Of course, nobody is sure who gave anything to anyone. There is no smoking gun. There will be no lawyers or court case. You didn’t ask to contract the virus du jour, and certainly didn’t intend to pass it on. You remind yourself and others, as both a small comfort, that you never even had

symptoms that Thursday. However, just like horseshoes and hand grenades, with the coronavirus “close enough” can count. And, more likely than not, you have not yet been able to push away the fact that you were a link in the chain that ended up killing someone. Maybe it wasn’t you that indirectly sickened that nurse’s aide that sickened her grandparent. Maybe. But likely it was. I invite you to live with that for a few seconds.

That could happen. That could happen to me, but probably won’t. It could happen to you, but probably won’t. However, on any given trip to the store with a friend riding shotgun when you probably won’t catch it, or on any given visit I make to a parishioner when I probably won’t pass it on, we could. What certainly will happen is that for the next four months, thousands of times across the country, this will happen.

I invite you to imagine it has or will happen to you. If the expectations for the spread of this disease are what they are expected to be, I’m guessing some unique version of the above fictitious story will happen to someone who witnesses today’s service. I need to imagine that it is me, because, although I’m pretty careful, I’m not careful enough. (Holding up my wrist) As you can see, on the inside of my left wrist I have written the word “Caution.” I invite you to do the same.

I promised two conflicting truths, two cairns, and here is the other one.

The second truth is entirely different. It is not like the above – an imaginary but believable story, nor is it about the dangers of socializing. Quite the contrary. Part two is about the science behind the less dramatic, less newsworthy, need for human connection. This truth, or cairn, is about imprinting upon us a concern for the long-term crisis of isolation and loneliness. Unlike the above story of “what *could* be” costs of socializing during the epidemic, take this portion of the sermon as the more persistent “what *does*” happen when we are physically separated from others.

I draw the many following images and all of the compiled facts and studies above from Robin Wright’s recent article about isolation in the New Yorker.

It is almost ironic that the struggle we have maintaining the “social distancing” required to flatten the curve of the latest pandemic takes place at a time when we have never been more alone. The kind of anxiety and isolation that is settling in right now is really an extreme short-term example of what more and more people experience on a daily basis. The medical consequences of this are serious, too.

Being social creatures, we are more ourselves when with one another than we are alone. When we are isolated, we are more prone to disease. Physical isolation and the feeling of it pushes our blood pressure up, has been proven to increase inflammation, and causes the release of hormones related to stress. Medically, according to Wright, the effects of long-term isolation have been compared to the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Take that in. Likewise, a 2018 Florida State College of Medicine study concluded that loneliness is associated with a 40% increase in the risk of dementia. In general, loss of human contact can, as Robin Wright deftly phrases it, “make life seem shallower, more like survival than living.”

Have you felt any of that over the last two weeks? I have. I don't live alone, but I mostly chart through my day alone. However, with my coffee shops and gyms closed, church meetings cancelled, visits curtailed, and little kids at the preschool I chase around all at home, I have wondered frequently to myself what I should do next. Sitting in my car at church in an empty parking lot or quietly in the office, I can smell the first few wafts of what it feels to be isolated. At first it feels like boredom, but soon enough I suspect being really isolated would begin to reek of meaninglessness and anxiety. As the statistics more than suggest, isolation is a health risk. The overall theme of Wright's article is that loneliness is not just a feeling; it's a biological warning signal to seek out other humans. As Wright phrases it, "Our brains have learned from brutal evolutionary lessons that social isolation is a death sentence." If you feel compelled, I invite you to write on the inside of your right wrist the word "Connection."

Wright, in her New Yorker article, presents studies that show that when people are proximate to one another, holding hands, and standing close, it turns out that our brains work better. We actually process information more efficiently in the presence of other people, even if they are six feet away.

With these two clear polar-opposite messages, I invite you to write on your heart and the inside of your wrist these single-word summaries of each truth as guides for how you might live over the next six weeks. When we are done isolating from corona and putting caution first, I want to encourage all of us not to forget how hard not connecting is. I pray we should forget the perils of missing human contact slower than how far apart we were supposed to stand.

So, for the next month or so, you have these two cairns to guide you. One screams caution, freeze; the other, to lean in and connect. I think it is obvious that this is no time to expand our physical reach. However, since we are essentially stuck at home, let's take the time offered by this curfew to remember just how medically essential human-to-human contact is. My prayer is that we not forget this when the quarantine lifts.

So, if you are like me, standing up and ready to do the next natural thing in your routine only to find your shoulders shrug and head drop with that option, and the next option and the next option unavailable, engage your fourth-best option and pick up the phone, or go for a walk – keeping a safe distance. Remember, even if it's unclear when it will end, it is not permanent.

Wash your hands, keep your distance, but stay in touch. **Amen**