

Voices: Don't become too comfortable with social distancing

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The phrase “social distancing” is an interesting one. When social distancing began to be discussed in the United States, I much preferred the phrase to the alternative “quarantine” because it felt less limiting and imprisoning.

After about a week under the oppressive dominion of COVID-19, a friend pointed out to me even “social distancing” is an unnecessary chain weighing us down amidst an already nigh unbearably weighty time.

Social distancing is, in truth, the last thing we should be doing right now. In place of “social distancing,” my friend insists on the phrase “physical distancing.”

Contrasting physical and social distancing

Physical distancing is a kindness that helps to keep the world spinning. Physical distancing is about safety, preserving the health of both ourselves and those closest to us. It is a considerate, compassionate and deliberate act for the good of others. It is a sacrifice being made for the sake of the vulnerable.

Isn't love, by its very definition and nature, sacrificial? Isn't that what Christ did for us?

Social distancing is isolation, its name implying total separation. It is a

poison willingly chugged, like a man dying of thirst convinced his salvation lies at the bottom of the bottle.

I can be physically distant from you and still maintain a life-giving, albeit diminished, relationship. But socially distanced? That is a severance of the ties that bind us, a total surrender of community and is acceptance of a life of abject isolation.

A socially distant culture

The more I think about it, though, the more “social distancing” seems suited to our culture. Have we not been already, in some way and slowly but surely, socially distancing from one another?

We can blame cell phones or social media or TV, but our addictions to these and the neglect of our interpersonal relationships through them merely are a symptom of a deeper problem. We all are disconnected. Worse still, we like it that way.

In our western culture—especially America—we like to consider ourselves rugged individualists and self-sufficient Clint Eastwood-types who scarcely would break a sweat pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We revel in our individualism, complain about the horrors of other people, and chase longingly after the maximum amount of alone time, because when I am by myself, my desires face no challengers for my attention.

Solitude in place of social distance

Everyone needs some amount of alone time, of course. Some solitude is healthy and good, particularly when getting away to be with God. Jesus illustrates such solitude clearly throughout the Gospels.

But in our pursuit of this prayer model of Christ, we have wed it forcibly to

our Western individualism and made an idol from the resulting twisted version of solitude. When solitude is our god, other people inevitably become demons who would lure us away from it.

At this point, some readers may be clamoring for their phones, racing to pull up videos of Italian citizens joining in song across abandoned streets from their individual homes. But this is my point precisely. We lunge blindly after solitude.

The deepest cry of our hearts is for community because that is how God designed us. Humans are not solitary creatures; at least, we're not meant to be. We long for social interaction, and to be starved of physical contact can be on par with physical pain.

The events of the past week drive this point home as I've heard people consistently lament the isolation, which is nothing compared to what many others are experiencing. We need each other, because in the words of Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for man to be alone."

What I hope for from social distancing

As a very social person who struggles to sit at home alone, I may be biased. But I hope this terrible turn of events can be eye-opening to us as a culture.

I hope we will see how much we need one another.

I hope we will see each other not as tools to fulfill our needs or, worse, outright obstacles to our happiness, but as brothers and sisters with whom to walk through life.

I hope we can start to see more fully how each of us can brighten each other's days and enrich each other's lives through the unique gifts, personality and perspective each of us brings.

I hope we start to see the image of God in every single person and treasure them as the image bearers they are.

I hope we treasure the time we get to spend with one another and not take it for granted.

Until this is over and we can see whether we bring the lessons we've learned about ourselves and others with us, I implore you to practice physical distancing as good stewards of others' health.

Even more deeply, I implore you to abhor social distancing. Pour that poison down the drain, and share of the cup of life with those around you.

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