

Voices: Looking for hope, purpose and blessing during a pandemic

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Social distancing. Prior to this past month, how often have we considered this now widely used term? And yet, in under a month this term has redefined every aspect of our lives.

As we all seek to adjust to the ever-changing recommendations concerning “social distancing” while we combat the spread of COVID-19, not only are our dining and workout habits, our schools, our social gatherings, our politics, our grocery shopping and our jobs affected, but our spiritual lives are impacted as well.

We often remind each other the church is not merely a building, but as countless Christians worship online over the coming weeks, we are faced with adding reality to that sentiment.

Giving up touch

When we encounter Jesus in Scripture, physical touch is commonly involved—the woman who touched his robe and was healed, Jesus rubbing his spit and dirt in the eyes of a blind man, a woman wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair, Thomas touching the scars in Jesus’ hands. Over and over, we see the power of touch in the ministry of Jesus.

As the body of Christ, we, too, find ourselves naturally in contact with others as we live out the gospel. From communion to corporate prayer, to hospital and nursing home visits, to food banks and other ministries, we

often find ourselves in close proximity.

We routinely grasp hands, share potluck dinners, and our teens often squeeze more people into a pew than previously thought possible. These common habits now are on hiatus.

How do we continue to love our neighbor when we can't be in groups larger than 10, must keep six feet of distance, and rightfully are barred from nursing homes or hospital visits? Our communal life will look radically different for the coming weeks. So, what are we to do?

Taking up hope

In 2020, we certainly have more access to people outside of our physical proximity than previous generations dependent on letters or long-distance phone calls. But still, the isolation and lack of physical proximity, coupled with the news concerning COVID-19, can be discouraging and frightening for many.

We must continue to find our hope in God. Consider these words Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his niece and her husband in May 1944 during his imprisonment in Germany due to his opposition to Hitler:

“It grieves me, of course, that the unexpected has happened and once again I am unable to celebrate this day with you, but I’ve become quite reconciled to it. I believe nothing that happens to me is without meaning, and that it is all right for all of us, even though it goes against our wishes. As I see it, I’m here for some purpose, and I only hope I may fulfill it.”

Granted, we are not enduring what Bonhoeffer had to experience, but his words can help each of us adjust to this current season as we minister to those who are suffering.

Giving purpose to the present

Can we social distance with purpose and meaning? Our smartphones give us an unprecedented ability to connect with small or large groups while still practicing social distancing. Additionally, our churches, schools, companies and organizations have leveraged this technology to remain connected, to continue meetings and classes and to press on with the tasks at hand. And this is good.

However, increased connection via a screen does not replace the importance of physical presence. Sharing or feeling empathy through a phone screen has its limits.

In Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Jean Twenge, a social psychologist from San Diego State University who has studied the various effects the "virtual" world and the "real" world have on the human psyche, states:

"It is worth remembering that humans' neural architecture evolved under conditions of close, mostly continuous face-to-face contact with others (including non-visual and non-auditory contact; i.e., touch, olfaction), and that a decrease in or removal of a system's key inputs may risk destabilization of the system."

In other words, as much as our screens may help us connect with the outside world, they cannot fulfill the innate desire of physical presence and experience. We must be creative in providing these necessary experiences for those who live alone during this time of social distancing, utilizing tangible forms of interaction that don't disappear when the screen is turned off.

For those living with others, we need to make sure our face-to-face time with family is not neglected in favor of the ever-enticing allure of social

media—particularly social media, as Lukianoff and Haidt share, that tend to “amplify social comparison rather than social connection.”

Lean into God

How can we utilize this time to bring glory to God? Stresses related to jobs, income and economic calamity can paralyze us in fear. Worrying about loved ones who work on the frontlines of the medical community, fretting for those at high risk from the disease, or balancing full-time jobs with new homeschooling responsibilities can squelch our joy, particularly when there is no outside social escape.

Again, turning to Bonhoeffer’s letter earlier referenced, he wrote:

“It’s my personal opinion that the next few weeks will bring such great and surprising events that one truly doesn’t know at the beginning of your leave how things will be by the end. As much as these events will affect our personal destinies, I do hope they won’t rob you of the essential peace of your days together.”

By leaning into the presence of God, we can strive to maintain the hope we need to live life to the fullest, even when it may seem much has come to a grinding halt.

Look for blessing

This week, the faculty with whom I serve quickly adapted to move classes online for our students, while overcoming unexpected obstacles and realities, both at work and at home. In the heart of the semester, everything changed and continues to change rapidly.

A couple of mornings ago, as I was slogging my way through the Book of Numbers, I shared with my faculty Numbers 6:24-26. There, nestled in the

intricacies and complexities of Nazirite hair care instructions, God drops this blessing: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

During this time of social distancing, when our communal lives may lack the face-to-face interactions to which we are so accustomed, we can know God continually blesses us by turning his face toward us and shining his face on us. May we, this week, catch a glimpse of God’s face.

Jack Goodyear is the dean of the Cook School of Leadership and professor of political science at Dallas Baptist University. The views expressed are those solely of the author.