

# Voices: Social distancing as a sacred act of mercy

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I've always considered myself an "outgoing introvert," meaning I like people but prefer to be alone. It's almost a week into social distancing, and I'm already starting to question if I'm actually a full-blown extrovert.

I find myself craving human interaction, and my house is feeling a little smaller than normal. My ongoing inner refrain has become, "This is what caring for your neighbor looks like," and I've worked it into mindfulness exercises during these last few days.

## Social distancing for our neighbor's sake

[Social distancing](#) essentially is keeping a safe distance between you and another individual. Six feet is recommended. The hope is the more space between you and other people, the less the virus will spread.

Even though I am a healthy young adult, I could pass the virus unknowingly to someone in a more vulnerable situation, such as an elderly adult or someone who is immune-compromised. So, even though I most likely would be OK if I caught this virus, my job right now is to make sure I keep my neighbor safe. "Neighbor" literally means everyone in the United States and the world.

Causing no harm to my neighbor reminds me of the ancient Egyptian practice of negative confession in which causing no harm to one's neighbors was considered an act of mercy.

While we all know social distancing is imperative right now, I think we can affirm it is hard. God created us to be in community with one another. That community usually looks like attending community events together, worshipping together, having game nights together or being in the office together.

When practicing social distancing and even self-quarantine, all of those opportunities essentially disappear. We're left in our homes by ourselves or with our families as we try to sort through fact and fiction on social media.

## **What we're learning through social distancing**

It seems we're finding out a couple of things through this pandemic. First, we're realizing we truly need each other. We need people to run to the store for us. We need grocers to continue stocking the shelves. We need to work together to keep people fed as schools and businesses shut down for the next few weeks. We need to see people and talk about everything going on in the world. When we have to take necessary precautions, we miss out on seeing God through his people, which takes a toll on us.

We've also learned social distancing doesn't necessarily mean social isolation. It can become social isolation easily, but with the technology available to most of us, we can figure out ways to connect with each other.

I don't want to downplay any of the very real feelings being experienced. Many reading this most likely are what Mr. Rogers would call "helpers." We want to help people, which is hard right now when "helping people" looks like staying at home. Again, we are practicing an absence of harming others as an act of mercy.

Many of us also live with anxiety on a daily basis, and this pandemic makes

life almost debilitating. We have loved ones we care about, and we want to make sure they are cared for and safe. All of those things can push us easily into depression and anxiety that makes reaching out for social interaction even harder.

## **Ways to be social from a distance**

One of the more powerful “social interactions” I was a part of this week was our Sunday worship service. This was done via Facebook Live so we all could “be together” from our own homes, where we wouldn’t spread any germs.

As we went through responsive reading, prayer, Scripture and the sermon, each of us could see the number of viewers and who was watching with us. We saw names of church members who had moved to different cities, and we knew they were worshipping with us that day. We talked about things we were afraid of, and also things that give us hope and promise. It was a communal, sacred experience where we all came together as one, despite being in different physical spaces.

I’ve also learned video chatting is so important during these times. It connects us to people across the country, while also protecting each other. It allows us to have a coffee date with a friend while being across town. It helps moms and dads stay sane as they’re in the house with kiddos home from schools and daycares. It reminds us there is life outside the walls of our houses and that continuing to connect with each other is important for our overall well-being.

I’ve also seen how social media can be used for good things. Yes, social media can also exasperate mental health concerns during this time, but it can also bring us together. I’ve seen educational, physical and emotional resources shared via social media. I’ve seen pastors share tips and pointers on how to bring Sunday worship to everyone in their own homes.

In a way, we all are trying to look out for one another, while also trying to protect the most vulnerable in our society. This is another act of mercy.

## **Counting our blessings and remembering others**

As I process what being social looks like right now, I am reminded of my privilege. I have a wonderful supervisor who insisted I work from home for the time being. As of now, I am not at risk of losing my income, and neither is my spouse. We have a stocked pantry and technology to connect us to family and friends, even though we are practicing social distancing.

I recognize what I have is not the case for all members of our communities. I recognize this pandemic is impacting others in a very real and life-changing way. For many people, it's not an option to work from home or stay home if they are sick. As we talk about ways to stay connected despite social distancing, we must remember these individuals and pray for their well-being.

May we care for each other well. May we love each other well. May we offer God's grace and kindness with everyone with whom we cross paths, both physically and digitally.

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