

2 Pentecost 2021

Come into our hearts, blessed Jesus. Come into our hearts, we pray.

Our souls are so troubled and weary. Come into our hearts today. Amen

There is little doubt that one of the casualties of the last 15 months has been the loss of relationships. The most tragic of which came with the loss of friends and family who died because of Covid. Officially, in this country, there have been 578,555 Covid-related deaths as of the end of May. I had to look it up because I had lost track of the count. The sheer number of deaths have tended to numb the effects of these losses within society but **definitely** not to those most affected. Even still, the numbers have decreased but are certainly not gone. Last Friday's update for the State of Michigan reported a total of 446 new cases and 27 additional deaths. The falling numbers are being met with decreasing restrictions and a re-opening of freedoms. For those 27 families, I can only imagine that it must feel like losing a son or daughter who is killed in combat a day before the cease fire goes into effect. People are celebrating and cheering as others continue to mourn. For these families and friends, relationships are gone forever. For the rest of us, there will be an attempt to rekindle relationships that may have gone by the wayside or simply put on hold due to the pandemic. Sure, ZOOM helped to maintain some connection with those we were separated from. Phone calls and emails to family and friends helped. Watching events live streamed on Facebook also helped.

But, as a whole, relationships suffered. Families could not spend time together. Children and grandchildren were unable to visit their loved ones in the hospital or in nursing homes. Letter writing had been declining for a long time anyway. The lost art of picking up the phone and calling someone made a comeback. Let's face it, trying to maintain a relationship let alone start a new one was difficult at best and took an inordinate amount of effort.

Now that society is opening up again for the long-term, what do we look at when it comes to our relationships with family, friends, with fellow Christians, **and yes**, especially with God?

"It's normal to be nervous or even feel guilty about reconnecting," says Angela Koreth, a social worker at the Menninger Clinic. "Assimilating back into society is like getting into a pool, you either dip your toe into the shallow end or you dive headfirst into the deep end. Once you gauge your comfort level, then you can begin to make healthy choices for your post-pandemic life."

Another clinical Social Worker, Mr. John J. O'Neill, EdD, LCSW, LCDC, CAS

made these recommendations 8 months ago for reconnecting in post-pandemic society.

"To gauge our comfort level, and reduce stress levels related to social situations, ask yourself these questions:

--What, from isolation, do I want to continue?

--How do I balance my social time and home time?

--What can I do to keep from booking my calendar full and causing increased anxiety?

--What am I going to do to take care of myself, whether it be time alone, exercise, or a massage?"

These are all questions that we have asked ourselves over the past year. Those who had spent long hours at their jobs were now working from home along with their spouses and their children who were trying to learn how to do home-school. Many people had to risk their health by going to work because they had no other choice.

All of this while the thought of re-entering the world was off in the distance. Family relationships were far from normal with some in quarantine due to illness and others who did their best to stay away from everyone.

Families were scrambling to redefine their relationships with each other, and many others were trying to deal with being isolated and alone.

Now that restrictions have pretty much lifted, there are many people who are feeling anxious about life returning to "normal", whatever **that** may look like.

Some schools did go back to in person classes in the past few weeks. Even dating is making a comeback. I came across a term that I had never heard before. The feelings of anxiety with returning to social dating has been coined; FOMU - or fear of meeting up, whether due to health concerns about COVID, or socially anxious about interacting with real life humans again. The return of hugging can be a real concern and it is OK to take it at your own pace.

But what about our congregations? For those who were already smaller in number prior to the pandemic, whatever those relationships may have looked like then, will most likely continue. We were fortunate to return to in person worship off and one over the last 9 months. Several of those services were outside when possible. Either way, we were able to see each other, so to speak, over several weeks. Yes, we were masked but could still be together while remaining physically distanced. Larger congregations were not as fortunate. Many of them however, mastered ZOOM to the extent of seeing each other on their phones and computers and even sharing a virtual coffee hour or Bible study.

I am convinced that social media saved many a congregation.

Bill Wilson, director of The Center for Healthy Churches in Winston-Salem, N.C., made this sobering statement: “the underlying message seems to be that while churches will certainly continue to offer virtual options in the future, our primary structures will revert back to pre-pandemic patterns, as the main focus, as soon as feasible. Like a home renovation that paints over old wallpaper and perhaps replaces a few fixtures, we expect this season of renovation to allow us to emerge from the pandemic looking better, but very similar to how we appeared pre-virus.

This may be an effective short-term strategy and may make us feel better about our capacity for adaptive change, but I suspect it may fail us long-term. In fact, if history holds, most of our technical changes will wither rather quickly and need to be refreshed again as soon as the next crisis hits our churches.”

It can be all too easy to dwell on the negative. For many, these last 15 months have been unlike anything we have seen before, causing anxiety, depression, fear, and sorrow. We do not have the history behind us, to really know what is to follow. Going back to what was considered normal in Feb 2020, will not work for long. Too much has changed.

Paul gives us some encouraging words this morning: “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

Paul was preparing the early Christian communities for the trials that would be a part of their existence. He could speak from the setting of his own persecution, pain, and imprisonment.

Paul continually worked on his relationships with Jesus, with God, and with those he served. He did this even when he was in isolation from those he loved.

The most common way we find discouragement is by fixing our gaze on the **externals**, the "outer nature" as Paul calls it, of our lives. If Paul had trusted in the physical, the temporal, the transitory things in life, he too would have lost heart. Instead, the apostle experienced his world on two levels at once -- the outer world and the inner world. The outer world was the place of conflict and trials. Like Paul, we often find ourselves in the midst of all of them.

But these are all external to our heart of faith. Paul could take heart, even in clear sight of all the ridicule he had to bear, the prison sentences he had to serve, the beatings he had to endure, because he knew none of these could harm his inner nature. The inner nature in Paul was Christ himself. Growing in Christ, for Paul, was a process that continued throughout a Christian's life, a process not complete until the whole "inner nature" is filled with Christ.

We must continue to work on our relationships with God, with Jesus, and with each other especially in these times of uncertainty. I believe that our success or failure, as we return to our 'new normal', will be based upon those relationships.

Paul could not lose heart because at the center of his being, there was Christ. May it be so for each of us.

In every instance where the world tells us it is time to give up, throw in the towel, forget it, lose heart -- the spirit of Christ within us takes hold and flourishes. Thanks be to God!

Amen!