**Getting Past What Separates Us.**

A sermon by Chris Wendell

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As some of you know, last week, while our corner of the world was changing at what seemed like breakneck pace, I was away at a monastery in upstate New York. When I left, I was planning to enjoy some peace and quiet, a program of professional study, and return on the weekend to Vestry Sunday in the morning and a beautiful Evensong in the afternoon. That’s not what happened. When I got in the car to drive back to Massachusetts, I learned there would be no school in Bedford for two weeks and that I should try to find toilet paper in upstate New York before I got on the pike, because Eastern Massachusetts was out. Yikes.

I have been visiting this same monastery annually for 19 years, a spiritual practice of sabbath and renewal. Trees that were saplings the first time I went there are now twenty feet high, or more. The river is more or less the same. The train tracks remain where they have been for generations. I appreciated very much the reminder that some things remain constant in this world, even as so much changes ever so rapidly.

The monastery had taken on the discipline of total silence for the season of Lent. This meant that other than during Chapel services and our class time, there was no talking. No socializing in the common room, no conversation at meals, no hushed whispers around the coffee machine. And the silence goes even deeper. Not only were we not to talk, but we were urged not to even smile or wave or interact much with the other 40 or so guests sharing the house with us. We were told to treat the discipline of silence not as a burden, but as a gift, to see what it would teach us. After all, the opportunity to be physically present but miles away inside yourself is not one we get very often. The adjustment was challenging at first. But by the end of the second day, I had begun to understand what the brothers meant. The silence, uncomfortable and even irritating at first, eventually became a doorway into new depths of my own inner life.

And it struck me upon returning to Bedford on Friday, that where we are now is basically the opposite circumstance. In the monastery, the invitation was to be physically present, but not to really be community. And here, in this moment, the invitation is to figure out how we can be community without being physically present. It is just as jarring to enter this kind of Lenten discipline, as it was to enter the enforced silence. Hard to keep to the rules, and hard to see them as any kind of a gift, at least at first. But here we are, none the less, entering a whole new kind of wilderness.

When the Israelites escaped Pharoah’s army through the Red Sea, they too entered the wilderness. And through that wilderness they journeyed the book of Exodus tells us, by stages, as God intended them to do. In this unfamiliar landscape they were, like us, without a map. They knew not how long they would be in the wilderness. They knew not what the fastest route would be. They knew not how they would be provisioned for their journey. And, so, understandably they were cranky. Most of the second half of the book of Exodus is like today’s passage – the people complaining at every turn, and the leader, Moses, nearly throwing his hands up at them. Even Moses had little insight into the stages that the Lord had in mind for the people, nor how many stages would be.

But the Israelites had a few things going for them in their wilderness. First, they believed they would eventually reach the promised land. And the vision of the land of milk and honey, the vision of a free society healed from the wounds that had scarred them, sustained them through their darkest hours. But more than that, they remembered that God was still with them, leading and guiding them. They remembered to keep their faith, to practice compassion and care for each other, and to keep moving forward. Except of course, when they didn’t. Many times they got so upset they forgot all those things and went a little crazy for little while, until they remembered again. This was a frequent cycle: remembering they were God’s people, living faithfully in hard times, forgetting all about that, and then remembering again.

We too, likely have found ourselves this week forgetting that God continues to be present with us, because we don’t really understand the plan, we definitely don’t have a map, and we didn’t necessarily choose to take the journey we’re now on. But in the midst of all the disruption to our lives, all the confusion and uncertainty, we continue to be God’s people and God continues to be our God. God’s presence never leaves us. No matter what boundaries are thrown up by the sudden discipline of social distancing, Christ will find a way to cross them and get to us, even if we cannot get to each other.

In the long Gospel story today about the Samaritan woman, we see just how committed Jesus is to crossing whatever boundaries humanity puts in place as he gathers his community. Jews and Samaritans were basically blood enemies, and would never speak to each other on cordial terms. Rabbis did not initiate conversation with women. And men of any kind would be extremely unlikely to be visiting a well, which was a space where women gathered for community as they did their work of hauling water. But all these social conventions which distanced people from one another: men from women, Jews from Samaritans, teachers from students, could not keep Jesus from building community.

My friends, neither can we. We cannot let the social conventions of social distancing that we must now adopt, keep us from building community with one another. We must find ways to do what Christians have always been called to do, which is build relationship across whatever social distance the world creates – be it the distance between people of different ethnicities, races, genders, levels of wealth, or, in our present moment, the physical distance we must keep to maximize the public health and well-being.

So how will we do this? How will we be a Christian community who crosses boundaries when we cannot gather in person? I don’t have the full plan, because we’re going to discover the blessings in those questions in stages. But to start, what if we each take the time that we would have spent driving to church, parking, going to coffee hour, and driving home, and used that time, say, 30 to 60 minutes a week, to practice another form of Christian discipleship?

We could use it to begin a regular Bible reading program of five to ten minutes per day. There are many apps and websites that can help us structure a Bible reading program. They can be as simple as ChristianityToday.com, which will email you a single verse to read each day, or as complex as the Read Scripture App, which can set up a daily Bible reading plan with cool white-board explanatory videos to help you understand the story. You could even do this with a buddy, a Bible reading partner with whom you could Skpye, email or talk on the phone to share notes.

Or, you could use the time to revive an ancient Christian practice of spiritual letter writing. In the middle ages, soul friends would often exchange letter of encouragement and comfort to one another as part of their spiritual practice. What if you took 30 to 60 minutes a week to write a special letter of welcome, comfort, challenge or strength to someone else in our parish. To someone whose faith you admire and appreciate, and whom you’d like to know that. Or to someone new to our community whom you wish you knew better, and who would feel welcomed by a note from you. Can you imagine what it would feel like to receive such a letter? You could help someone else have that feeling. We can give you their address!

Or, you could use the time to go deeper in your life of prayer. Perhaps you could resume praying for your Lenten Prayer Partner from last year. Or, try a new way of praying, like centering prayer -- or intercessory prayer, holding the names on our parish prayer list in your heart each day. Or maybe you’d like to try just sitting in silence for a few minutes each day – and discovering the gift of centering yourself in quiet before you go out and face this brave new world we’re in.

Just because we can’t be together physically doesn’t mean we’re not still knit together in the body of Christ. No amount of social distance can put us outside of God’s family. It’s our job to remind each other of that, and to continue to welcome more and more people into this kind of all inclusive, radical love and compassion.

We may be grumpy in the days ahead. We may not like the how our faithful discipleship of social distancing feels at times. We may forget occasionally that God is leading us through this stage of the wilderness on a journey that will bring into the promised land. But we also have the capacity to remember, who we are, and whose we are. We have the capacity to remind ourselves that the sacrifices we take on are not mostly for ourselves, but for the sake of those even more vulnerable in our communities. We have the capacity to remind ourselves that even if we can’t get to church, we can always be the church. We have the capacity to ask God, in our hardest moments, to make us instruments of God’s peace. Amen.