

Covid-19 and “Social Distancing”

At the beginning of his Gospel Matthew tells us, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means ‘God with us’)” 1:23. At the end of that same Gospel the Lord Jesus sends his disciples out into the world promising, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” 28:20.

It is good news that **God is with us!** He is not absent, distant or unaware of us and our experiences. Jesus took on flesh and blood to be with us. In his physical presence people found comfort, hope, faith and restoration. They touched him, heard his voice, saw his tears, washed his feet, bumped into him in the street, ate with him and drank with him the wine he made. Jesus presence with his people was real. And while it may be less tangible, his presence with us by his Spirit continues today.

Not only that, but Jesus also expected his followers to be with one another. Matthew records Jesus’ promise, “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” 18:20. When Jesus sent out the disciples, he sent them out in pairs, Mark 6:7, and later when he sent out the seventy, he also sent them out in pairs, Luke 10:1. The early church gathered together, in upper rooms, in places of prayer, in synagogues and in one another’s homes. The author of the letter to the Hebrews reminds them, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” 10:24-25. Being with and encouraging one another go together.

So in the midst of Covid-19 and ‘social distancing’ I would like to reflect on ‘being with’ one another. First up it’s not quite accurate to call it ‘social distancing’, what the authorities are asking for is ‘physical separation’ (and good hand hygiene). We should observe the 1.5m separation when we are in the community. At this time ‘being with’ has to be done from a distance.

It seems to me that this is particularly difficult for people who have a preference for expressing or receiving affection by touch – handshakes, hugs, kisses, back-slaps and even the friendly ‘elbow to the ribs’ are all out. Those physical expressions however, are the pathway by which many people know and feel that they are loved and appreciated, that they are connected to others, and that others are ‘with them’.

If you are a person who expresses affection by touch, here are a few things that might help you maintain your feelings of connection in spite of so called ‘social distancing’;

- Maintain contact in other ways – touch may be important to you but it is not the only way to express your connection with others, or to feel their acceptance.
- Practice being aware of your sense of touch in general. How does this shirt feel? What are the soles of my feet feeling right now? How good is this warm shower?
- Consciously make an effort to remember those times when you have felt welcomed, accepted, and reassured by contact with others. Form a mental picture of those occasions in your mind, and associate those feelings with your mental pictures.
- Remind yourself that this contactless state is just for a while, it’s a season. There will come a time when once more you will feel the warm embrace of friendship and acceptance.

But whether touch is your particular thing or not, we all need to be with one another in the sense of backing and supporting each other. And we all need to remind ourselves of the great truth of the gospel – God is with us!

Sending hugs,
Richard.