## [**What Does It Mean to Be Alive?**](https://riverviewfriend.wordpress.com/2020/05/10/what-does-it-mean-to-be-alive/)

Posted on [May 10, 2020](https://riverviewfriend.wordpress.com/2020/05/10/what-does-it-mean-to-be-alive/)

by [Doug Bennett](https://riverviewfriend.wordpress.com/author/bennettdoug/)

Message given at Durham Friends Meeting, May 10, 2020

The message I have this morning is about what it means to be alive – something very much on my mind as we go through this time of pandemic.

The summer I turned 13, playing baseball at a local summer program at the school just up the street, I was hit in the face by a thrown baseball. It fractured my jaw and generally made a mess of my mouth.

It was such a mess that it was only after I’d spent an hour in the emergency room and another hour in a dentist’s chair that we knew I’d lost a front tooth. Two of my friends were dispatched to see if they could find it. Sifting through the dirt in front of home plate they did. As instructed, they put it in a glass with (I think) some salty water. And the next day the dentist put it back in my mouth. It might work, he said, maybe not, but it’s worth a try. It might still be alive. It might still be alive. What a thought!

Turns out it didn’t work. The tooth didn’t live and had to be removed a few days later. But I’m glad they tried. I can’t say I really thought about what it meant to say that the tooth might still be alive when it was there in the dirt in front of home plate. But I find myself thinking about it now. It’s what makes kidney transplants possible, or heart or liver transplants, blood transfusions, amazing things.

That tooth was a little bit of me, outside my body, still living.

Fast forward several decades. Earlham College has a wonderful practice of inviting the faculty to have lunch together every Wednesday. It’s a chance to socialize with colleagues from all the different departments. You learn all kind of things sitting next to a weaving teacher, an anthropologist, a chemist and a psychologist.

I remember one lunch where I made some off-hand remark about a virus (I can’t remember why) about what an amazing living thing a virus was, so small, able to cause so much mayhem. A biologist sitting next to me said “what makes you think a virus is alive?” Those of us at the table were all surprised and offered ideas about what it meant to be alive – all of which were true of a virus. The biologist shot them all down. It can’t live on its own, he said. It can’t reproduce on its own. It needs a host. He left us wondering whether a virus really is alive.

On the Center for Disease Control website it says *“A virus is an infectious agent that occupies a place near the boundary between the living and the nonliving. It is a particle much smaller than a bacterial cell, consisting of a small genome of either DNA or RNA surrounded by a protein coat. Viruses enter host cells and hijack the enzymes and materials of the host cells to make more copies of themselves. Viruses cause a wide variety of diseases in plants and animals, including AIDS, measles, smallpox, and polio.”* Also, COVID-19 we now know.

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“Near the boundary between the living and the nonliving.” A virus contains RNA or DNA, and it can replicate itself, but only if it has entered the cells of something else that is alive. It can’t exist on its own, though like my tooth it can sort of be alive for a short while as it passes from one host organism to another – from one person to another as we sneeze, for example. Viruses hijack our bodies for the sole purpose of making copies of themselves.

Viruses can make us sick; they can kill us; but they depend upon us for their existence.

What does it mean to be alive? That’s my question for this morning. I don’t want to lose track of that.

Today, all of us gathered here on Zoom are all alive – but living a strange existence. We’re separated from one another. Mostly we can communicate only by email and phone and other electronic means. Hugs are rare. We can share meals only with those in our immediate families. Are we really alive? It feels like something is missing.

A virus isn’t alive when it’s by itself, when it’s on its own. Are we? Are we alive when we’re by ourselves? I think that’s a question that is being forced upon us. And I think our answer is this: we‘re not as alive as we’d like to be. We’d like to be with others.

We like to think that one of the glories of Western culture is “Individualism.” It’s the idea that “the interests of the individual are or ought to be ethically paramount.” Individual rights. Rugged individualism.

But deep down we know we can carry that idea too far. In 1623, [John Donne wrote](https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/no-man-is-an-island/) *“No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”*  Two thousand years before that, Aristotle began his book *The Politics* with these words: *“Man is a polis creature.”* He means, by nature, human beings are beings that live in community. That need one another. That rely on one another. And not just for material goods, but for love and friendship, for support, for grieving and for celebration.

It turns out we aren’t so different from the virus. It can’t exist by itself/on its own. But neither can we.

This is one lesson we’ve all been learning as we have been shut up in our homes, distancing ourselves from one another: that we need one another. But it’s more than that: we need each other in a relationship of love that connects us with God because that is what gives us life. The Gospel of John expresses this in a powerful metaphor: Jesus says:

***4*** *Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

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***5*** *I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

***6*** *If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. …*

But there is another lesson, harder, but at least as important about ‘being alive.’ In this time of virus, in this time of dying, it is easy to fall into thinking that ‘all living things are good.’ What lives is all part of God’s glory, all to be nurtured, all to be celebrated, all to be saved. It’s easy to think that — especially easy as spring blooms around us.

As we gather here separated from one another, however, we know this is not so. There are bits of creation that are not so good, and this virus is one of them. The cancers that afflict too many of us: they are another. Murder hornets: we’ve just started hearing about them. Black flies. Typhus and typhoid and smallpox. I mean all these things, but there’s more.

There are also bits of ourselves that live all too commonly within us, things that are not good: selfishness, pride, envy, greed, wrath – things like that. These things become a part of us all too easily, and they are things that should not live within us. We might think of them as like a virus. They live within us, become a part of us, even take over our lives. They infect us.

They are little bits of us – within us – that should not be living.

Jesus asks us to let these things die within us so that we can live a new and transformed life. Some of the hardest parts of the New Testament are about this.

Says Paul in Colossians: ***5*** *Therefore put to death the parts of your earthly nature.*  In his letters to the Romans, Paul says: ***13*** *For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.*

And in Ephesians, Paul reminds us: ***22*** *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;* ***23*** *to be made new in the attitude of your minds;* ***24*** *and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

Can we think of these things, our “deceitful desires” that too easily become a part of us, as like a virus, having life only because they latch onto us and work their own purposes? Can we think of these things as parts of us that must die so we can truly live? Can we think of them as infections – even infections we carelessly pass from one to another? If we can, we know the cure: to love one another in the vine.

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Can we find ourselves a new life by ridding ourselves of these, by loving one another? This is the transformed life to which we are called.