Bauerschmidt 03192020 Lent 3

“Lent 3”

By Frederick (Fritz) Bauerschmidt Mar. 19th, 2020

Readings: [Exodus 17:3-7; Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42](http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/031520.cfm) Among the many new things that the coronavirus has brought into our lives is the phrase “social distancing.” This is the term for one of the key prescriptions for slowing the spread of the coronavirus to the point where cases of Covid-19 do not overwhelm our medical facilities. The idea is that you literally “keep your distance” from other people to reduce the chance of being infected or infecting others. In today’s Gospel, which tells of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, we hear of a different kind of social distancing. The woman is surprised to have Jesus ask her for a drink because, we are told, “Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.” Jews and Samaritans viewed each other as heretics who practiced deviant forms of the religion of Israel. But more than that, Jews considered Samaritans to be in a sense “unclean,” sources of a kind of religious contagion. For the Jews, social contact with a Samaritan was a risk to one’s religious purity. This is why the Samaritan woman is so shocked to have Jesus ask her for water; it is as if you asked to drink from the water bottle of someone with a deadly disease.

This sort of social distancing sees the other, at best, as one beyond my sphere of moral concern and, at worst, as a threat to be contained or eliminated. It is a phenomenon that is still with us today, manifest in divisions of race and economic class, of nations and generations. We see it when people act as if the pain and struggle of those who are different must be kept at a distance, lest they infect us. What do these two kinds of social distancing have to do with each other? The first sort is a necessary and life-saving measure to slow the progress of this disease. But the second sort of social distancing, the kind that separated Jews and Samaritans, the kind that separates races and classes in our own day, rather than being a life-saving measure, is a death-dealing way of life. It is death-dealing to those we keep at a distance because it seeks to make us immune to their struggles and deaf to their cries of suffering. It is death-dealing to us as well, because it requires us to harden our hearts, to deny any natural compassion for and solidarity with our fellow human beings. It makes us less human, less fully alive with the love that is God.

Jesus breaks through this death-dealing social distancing by the simple act of asking the Samaritan woman for a drink of water. Jesus bridges the social distance between Jew and Samaritan, breaking down the dividing wall that separated them, so that he can offer her the water of eternal life. He does this not only for the Samaritan woman but for all of us who were far from God through sin, our hearts hardened to both God and neighbor. Paul writes in today’s second reading, “while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” In Jesus Christ, God has opened his heart to us and crossed the distance separating us, and he calls us to do the same.

So we can distinguish between the social distancing that we must undertake in these extraordinary circumstances and the social distancing that we must overcome by throwing caution to the wind and stepping across the dividing lines of race and class and age and nationality. Lent is a time to examine our consciences and return to the Lord; this public health crisis also calls for us to examine our consciences. I may be confident that I am healthy enough to carry on my life as usual and run the risk of getting sick with Covid-19, but do I spare a thought for the elderly or the physically frail person with whom I come in contact and whom I might infect? I may feel a sense of relief at the closing my children’s school as a measure to protect them from infection, but do I spare a thought for the single working parent who will be left without childcare if the schools close? I may not worry about my ability to receive excellent medical care should I fall ill, but do I spare a thought for the uninsured or for those in medically underserved areas? The death-dealing social distancing that runs throughout our society makes it easy to think only of ourselves and to make ourselves blind and deaf to those who are most vulnerable.

Our Catholic tradition calls us to care not only for our individual well-being, but for the common good of all people. Now is the acceptable time to embrace that tradition. It is not only prudent that we adopt practices of physical social distancing in order to slow the spread of a potentially deadly disease, but it is something that love demands. And it is imperative that we who are followers of Jesus reject the social distancing that blinds us to the needs of those most vulnerable. Moses struck the rock in the desert with his wooded staff and life-giving water flowed forth. In this season of Lent, in this time of crisis, may the wood of the cross strike our stony hearts so that the life-giving water of God’s love may flow forth from us to quench the thirst of those most in need.

And may God have mercy on us all.

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