

“Live into Your Calling”

Hello, my dear friends in Christ, I pray that you are all healthy, happy, and doing well. I also pray that the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ is with you during this anxious and troubled time.

Well, we are now a couple of weeks into this unprecedented era of social distancing and self-quarantine caused by the deadly virus COVID-19 and, as predicted, the number of new cases here in the United States continues to grow at an exponential rate. The virus, infecting some 15,219* people, is now in every state of the Union, and some 201* people have now succumbed to the disease and perished. (Numbers as of March 20, 2020).

We always understood that folks over the age of sixty with pre-existing health conditions, like heart disease and diabetes, were at greatest risk of contracting this virus, but the virus, we now know, is affecting younger people between the ages of 20-54 much more than we originally thought. Forty percent of all hospitalizations in the United States associated with the virus, I just read, consist of this age group, and many of these young people are requiring critical care. Some have even died.

Just the other day I read a story in the New York Times about one family in New Jersey which has been decimated by this terrible disease. Seven members of just this single nuclear family got the disease and three of them died, including a beloved mother, and two of her children. Four other relatives were later hospitalized and placed into critical condition – their fate currently unknown.

In New York, entire neighborhoods have been isolated, and the National Guard has been called to enforce the restrictions. Borders have been sealed and travel between countries eliminated. There has even been some talk of stopping travel between states. In California, some nine million residents have been ordered to “shelter in place,” a euphemism for do not leave your home. Two members of the United States Congress have now tested positive and are in quarantine. More states are closing public schools, and some are considering closing daycares, too. Millions of Americans have been laid off from work or ordered to work from their homes.

The bottom line is that no one is safe, and everyone is feeling the devastating impact of this illness as society and the economy are shutting down.

With all these public closings, everyone is increasingly required to stay at home, clustered together in close quarters as spouses, families, housemates, or as friends, and this is beginning to create a colossal new challenge for many. Spouses, who are accustomed to long separations because of work, are now forced to spend more time together during the day. Habits and mannerisms once averted are now having to be endured. Parents, who are accustomed to long separations from their children because of school and extracurricular activities, are obliged not just to

work at home, but to ensure that their children are either educated or entertained at home, too. Siblings, accustomed to being with their friends, are commanded to play with one another, and their disputations over superfluous matters is enough to drive their parents mad. There are no more breaks in all this constant relating with each other, and this is beginning to take a spiritual and psychological toll upon some. It is causing a lot of stress and inner turmoil between loved ones as frictions mount, interpersonal conflicts soar, and nerves are increasingly frayed.

One of the positive ways in which folks are dealing with all this relational fatigue and mounting interpersonal stress is to make light of it. Social media is full of funny memes folks are creating in order to take out their frustrations with loved ones in humorous ways rather than harmful ones. I saw one picture with a mom busy at her computer monitor, but behind her the kids were hog-tied on the floor with duct tape to their mouths. Some I know have joined a group in which they voice their frustrations with family members by blaming an imaginary person named "Cheryl." If the husband leaves a dirty dish on the sofa, blame "Cheryl." If the child keeps asking the same question over-and-over again while you are trying to concentrate on work, admonish "Cheryl." These are just two small examples among many of the creative ways folks are dealing with all this relational turmoil from which few of us can escape right now.

But what happens as the days and weeks pass and the helpful humor and "Cheryl" phenomena run their course? What occurs when interpersonal friction and relational stress rise to the level of full-blown anger, and folks simply cannot stand each other anymore? What then? Will we ruin the relationships we hold dear with mean words, which cannot be taken back? Will we hurt one another and drive each other crazy to the point at which, when this isolation is over, we will never want to see each other again? Will we emerge from this crisis stronger and more unified, or more divided and factious than ever?

From a Christian point of view, all these questions beg still others. How should we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, view this situation and its myriad relational challenges? How shall we, as followers of Jesus Christ, treat one another during this time of closeness from which there is no break?

In a situation such as this I am, of course, reminded of several passages from Holy Scripture, the medium through which God speaks to, guides, and consoles us in these troubled and stressful times. It is through these words from God that we find the key which will unlock the door to relational health in this limitless time we will have together in the weeks and months ahead.

In Ephesians 4:1-3, Paul writes: **"...I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be HUMBLE and GENTLE. BE PATIENT with each other, MAKING ALLOWANCE FOR**

EACH OTHER'S FAULTS because of your **LOVE**. Make every effort to keep yourselves **UNITED** in the **Spirit**, binding yourselves together with **PEACE.**"

And in Romans 12:9-13, Paul also writes: "**Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine AFFECTION and take delight in honoring one another...BE PATIENT in trouble...when people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice HOSPITALITY.**"

And finally, in 1 Timothy 1:5, Paul writes: "**The purpose...is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscious, and genuine faith.**"

Through these words of the Apostle, I believe God is instructing us to see this time of quartering closely with family members and friends within the challenging confines of our homes as an opportunity – **an opportunity to prove that we are living lives worthy of our calling.** In this time of unmitigated closeness with loved ones, now is the time to demonstrate to God and one another that we can put our money where our mouth is when it comes to our discipleship.

What is our calling? **Our calling is to, in all situations, love other people,** even family and friends, as selflessly and limitlessly as God loves them! And we know that God loves them because, in 1 John 4:16, we read that "**God is love.**" And, in 1 John 3, we read that "**God is love**" and "**because God loves us, we should love each other in truth by our actions.**" In 4:7: "**...love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God.**"

God most fully expresses his love for every human being in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Mark's Gospel, we see that Jesus is humble and gentle toward all people, even the ones who are annoying him and will not leave him alone to pray by himself or do what he wants to do. Throughout most of the Gospels, Jesus is patient with others, and he makes huge allowances for their faults. I do not know of a situation in which Jesus turns someone away because that person is interrupting his other "work." Jesus makes every effort to be united with others, even when they do not follow his directions and they, like James and John, are fighting among themselves over superfluous things. Jesus seeks peace with people in every interpersonal activity he conducts with others. Jesus loves everyone all the time, and my friends, so should we in this perplexing time.

Jesus never pretends to love those closest to him – he really and genuinely loves them with all his heart. In every situation Jesus shows those whom he loves sincere **affection**, and he honors them with kindness at every opportunity. Jesus shows **hospitality** every time anyone approaches him. He tunes into what they are saying, and he listens intently to them. He helps them solve their problems in productive

and helpful ways. Should we not work very hard in this perturbed situation to do the same?

But how can we do this most effectively? How can we **prove ourselves worthy of our calling to love others in every situation?**

In one of his addresses earlier this week, I believe that Pope Francis offered good advice. We can show others the love of God in this troubled time through **simple acts of affection**. **Affection** is a strong feeling or constant regard and dedication to someone. Nothing will challenge our feelings for one another or our dedication to each other more than this time of limitless contact we will experience over the next several weeks or months. So, **affection** will become an important virtue in our lives together during this crisis. **Affection** will be the key ingredient that will keep us together and unite us more strongly together as we emerge from this peculiar era. **Simple acts of affection and kindness** toward each other will be **the way in which we will prove that we are worthy of our calling** in these complicated times.

What do **simple acts of affection and kindness** look like? When our child is asking the same question over-and-over again, or is demanding that we play with her when we need to work, rather than ignore or admonish her, we can demonstrate the love of God and live a life worthy of our calling by patting her on the back and listening to her, or by giving her a hug and acknowledging her. We can demonstrate the love of God and live a life worthy of our calling to our spouse or roommate by staying calm and kindly working a difference out rather than yelling at or sarcastically blaming him. We can demonstrate the love of God and live a life worthy of our calling to those with whom we are confined by constantly smiling at them and telling them how much we appreciate them – an unkind or harsh word should never be uttered. If we have nothing positive or **tender** to say to one another, then perhaps we should follow the advice of several proverbs which teach us to keep our mouths shut. We must always be mindful of our facial expressions and the tone of our words. If they do not convey **affection**, then we must amend them.

I believe God is guiding us to use this time of confinement and the relational stress and interpersonal friction we are beginning to experience as little tests – tests which we can easily prove our worthiness as disciples of Jesus Christ. Through **simple acts of affection**, we will demonstrate the love of God to one another and we will fully live into our calling.