

Sermon: “A Season of Sheltering with the ones you love.”

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A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Jeffrey told me that he would be out of town and asked if I would conduct the service this Sunday. I quickly agreed without thinking it through (how unusual), and here I am.

I must say that it is a little weird to give a sermon without anyone in the church. The good thing is I don't have to worry about Charles standing up to boo. And those of you who like to walk in late, I won't have to pause while you find a seat. Also, you are not obligated to be in church on Sunday at 10:00 a.m. You can watch the service at any time, and you don't even have to dress for church.

The bad part is that I feel like that line in the Beatles Song, “Eleanor Rigby”

*“Father McKenzie
Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear
No one comes near
Look at him working
Darning his socks in the night when there's nobody there
What does he care?

All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people
Where do they all belong?”*

These lyrics, and our world today, lead me to the message that I wanted to share with you today.

This Covid-19 pandemic started in early March, right as the church was beginning the season of Lent prior to Easter, and I jokingly said that for Lent, we were giving up going outside. Little did I know that would become true, and then some. Many of us do not like being alone. We do not like “sheltering in place.”

There are countless studies out there about the need to be touched. How children who are not held when they are infants are more likely to have long term developmental problems. Many of us are social people, and we need to be around and amongst other people. The NY Times had an article about how the “Coronavirus

pandemic has placed this country on the verge of a mental health crisis, with daily doses of death, economic uncertainty, isolation and fear generating widespread psychological trauma.” It went on to say that federal agencies “warn that a historic wave of mental-health problems is approaching: depression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide.” The article points out that nearly half of Americans report that the coronavirus crisis is harming their mental health. The Covid-19 crisis is added to the stress caused by the racial unrest in the country, the protests, the upcoming election, as well as the ongoing economic impact caused by all of this. Add to that, the shelter in place orders and the stress caused by being away from friends and family or isolated at home with family.

The problem with this crisis is that it is not ending any time soon. It is honestly quite exhausting. If you have your television on, the news is in 24-hour-a-day crisis mode. Every time I turn the TV on there is a banner that reads, “Breaking News,” and it never turns off. There is a tally running on the side of the news anchors keeping us updated on the number of people infected, and the number of deaths. It is like we are at war, and the number of casualties is growing. The problem is we are at war with a virus, and there is no end in sight. No one to sign a treaty with and end it.

We are told to stay at home. Some of us must remain at home for fear of catching a virus that will likely kill us. My former assistant at work has not left his home since February 26th since he is missing most of one of his lungs, he knows that the Covid-19 virus will kill him. So, he is isolated. Being isolated is hard. Virtual hugs are like virtual money. They are empty. Even when you do go out, you don’t get the chance to smile at people, or see them smile back. And an elbow bump is not very rewarding. You also limit who you see or what you do, because you don’t want to get sick or make someone you love, sick. We are working on Zoom calls and meetings, but they are just not the same as sitting across from someone and talking or whispering in an ear.

So, we are sheltering at home. The Sheltering at Home orders brought to mind the times in the bible where people go out into the wilderness alone to become closer to God. The 40 days without food or water becomes the ultimate test of faith. Elijah was told to eat before he began his journey, and he ate and drank enough to give him strength for forty days. Moses, spent forty days on the mountain, and he received the ten commandments. The flood that is told with the story of Noah lasted forty days, and Jesus goes into solitude for forty days twice in the bible. Once after he is baptized and again before he is crucified.

The readings today speak of the seasons: To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: the reading then says, “a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;”

Isn't that the time we are in right now? A time to not embrace. A time to shelter in place. A time to isolate. But will this season be only 40 days? Or will it be longer? Do you think when Moses led his people in the desert, he thought it would be for forty days? Or did he know it would be for a longer than he would live? Do you see this “season” as an opportunity to get closer to God? Some of us have trouble being alone with our thoughts. We may not hear the voice of the devil as Jesus did, but maybe a voice that sounds similar to our own but is not a nice person. Some would call it an inner saboteur. Amy Pohler says her inner saboteur sounds like Kathleen Turner, which would be a lot easier to recognize. I see the inner saboteur as your self-doubt. The voice in your head that tells you “you are not good enough,” “you have a pimple,” “your hair looks terrible,” “you should not wear that outfit,” etc. These are the voices that make you self-critical, insecure, and unhappy. Are they the voice of God? Are they the voice of the Devil? They are neither.

In the second reading, we hear about Jesus in prayer, and his prayer state transforms him into a glowing beautiful being. Isn't that how prayer should work? If we prayed hard enough or well enough that we could glow, don't you think we would pray more often if we glowed afterward? But, in reality, a state of grace does make you glow. Your spirit shines out of you to the world and you become a beacon of hope to others. The problem is that we don't often focus on the praying, or the good thoughts in our head, but listen to the inner saboteur instead.

Helen and Charles over the past year gave us some pointers on the power of having meditation in your life. They speak of the effort to clear your mind and let your soul relax and finding more peace. The challenge is when you are alone with your thoughts, you need to block out the negative voices and thoughts.

Two Wolves is a Cherokee Indian legend and illustrates the most important battle of our lives – the one between our good and bad thoughts. Here is how the story goes:

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy.

“It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth,

compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Our thoughts can be our own worst enemy. That is, if we let them. Think about how you may be “feeding” your negative thoughts by allowing them to rule your mind. Next time you have a negative thought, catch it and ask yourself, “What is this thought doing for me?” You will find that the answer is that all they are doing is disempowering you. You can immediately feel more empowered by focusing on something good in your life and cultivate the practice of gratitude.

We can create greater peace, confidence and a more positive outlook by learning how to manage our thoughts. After all, this battle can be won because we have the power of choice!

Which wolf are you feeding? Remember, you always have a choice

Our third reading today speaks to that. You have the choice of what you focus on, and if you focus on Godly thoughts, you will be rewarded.

When you go out for a hike, you can choose to hear the music in the hills, and you can focus on the gifts of the world. You can feed that part of your soul by what you focus on.

So, this season, we are alone at home. We are alone with our thoughts. A Chinese Proverb says, “Enjoy yourself. It’s later than you think.” Isn’t that the truth?

As you know, Jesus stated that you should “love your God with all your heart and all your soul, and you should love thy neighbor as you love yourself.” As reflected in the Gospel of Mark.

This is a reminder that we should see God in everyone we meet. Even the person staring back at us in the mirror. We need to decide that we are going to focus on the positive thoughts and messages that we hear in our heads, and we are going to cultivate that love. We are going to spend time focused on the good in the world. We need to turn off the news in order to take a break from the on-going stress of the world and take time to feed our souls. That may be listening to music, speaking to friends, writing letters to people you have not seen in a while. What better gift would there be then to get an unexpected letter from a friend or loved one in the mail? Why not write one?

Another Chinese Proverb says, “If you are depressed you are living in the past. If you are anxious, you are living in the future. If you at peace, you are living in the present.” Let us be at peace.

As we shelter at home, who are we with? If we are alone, are we sheltering at home with a holy person? A person who reflects God to those they interact with. Are we sheltering at home with a person we love? You should be. God is there with you and sheltering with you. You are a perfect person who is perfectly loved and should love yourself perfectly. You are commanded by God to love yourself. How can you disobey that order?

Loving yourself unconditionally is very hard. We tend to focus on our shortcomings, and where we have failed in the past, but the truth is, you can’t change the past, all you can do is be here today, and make today perfect. Be better to yourself today and focus on your gifts.

We find that our season of sheltering at home may be a very long season, but we will all emerge as butterflies. We will appreciate our time together more. We will appreciate our hugs more. We will appreciate meals with friends more. Maybe this Season of Sheltering in place is a message from God to appreciate our lives together, by keeping us apart to know what we are missing. Maybe it is a time for us to be in the wilderness alone, and to cultivate our relationship with God, and become stronger.

This season will pass, and we will be together once again, but in the meantime, lets remember to love who you are and who you are with. We are all of God’s children, and we deserve nothing less than happiness and love all the days of our lives. This is a season of sheltering in place and being apart, but also a season to get to a closer relationship with ourselves and with the God within us. Let us become a beacon of hope and love for others to see when we emerge from our isolation.

Amen
