

“WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW IS ... PRESENCE”

Psalm 23; John 15:1-5, 12-17

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The comedian George Carlin once said, “I’ve adopted a new lifestyle that doesn’t require my presence.” When he wrote this 20 or so years ago, it was just a joke, a cynical comment, perhaps, about how difficult life can sometimes be – especially when there are high expectations. Today... maybe it doesn’t sound quite so much like a joke. Thanks to new technologies, we really can have lifestyles that don’t require us to be actually present for very much. It’s possible to work remotely, have friends and take classes and even date on line, do research without going to the library, shop for almost anything without walking into a store, join groups without attending meetings, and get entertainment, religious inspiration, medical advice or emotional support without leaving home. We can see grandchildren opening presents or participating in piano recitals without travelling to where they are. We can play games or have arguments with folks we will never meet.

There are lots of benefits to be sure. But the technologies that “connect” us also make it easy for us to distance ourselves. We can give without getting too close to needy people. We can “show support” for a cause without any real cost or effort. We can have the illusion of friendship without the messiness of real people’s flaws and quirks. We can have the inspiration of a worship service without anybody asking us to get involved in the church’s mission. We can present a carefully crafted persona to others who will never get close enough to know if it represents who we really are. We can feel free to say whatever we want, no matter how rude, ignorant or reckless, because we aren’t saying it to anyone we have to actually deal with in real life.

Even when we are physically present, we’re often not 100 per cent there. Often the culprit is our cell phones; there’s some really interesting recent research about how the constant presence of cell phones during a conversation divides attention and diminishes the depth of the conversation as well as the sense of connectedness between people.

Of course it’s always been possible to choose a not-fully-connected way of being. But technology has made it so much easier, and so much more the norm – even for those not highly engaged in technology. We have gotten so used to sound bytes and either-or positions and the demand for simple fixes that nuanced and complex discussions are exceptional. And who has time for a long and deep conversation? Our lives are full of pressures and expectations; it’s hard to be “in the moment” because there is the next task to get ready for. It’s hard to be fully present because there is always someone or something else clamoring for our attention.

I believe this is all very much related to the deep divisions, the lack of compassion, and the heightened anxiety we are witnessing around us in these days. Our world needs many things; one of the most basic is the gift of presence.

Now, we have frequently been given to believe that faith is a pie-in-the-sky fantasy and the church is an out-moded institution that has nothing relevant to offer the modern world. We

hear this enough, and we start to think it's true. But I don't believe it. I believe that we have resources of faith that can bring hope to the needs and hurts and empty spaces in our world. Over the next few weeks, Jerry and I want to explore some of them with you.

Perhaps the most foundational of those resources is the gift of presence, which for us, of course is grounded in our belief in the presence of God. This is absolutely the most basic claim of Christianity. From God walking with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden to Jesus promising "I will be with you always," the Biblical story is *all* about presence. In between, God led the people through the wilderness, present with them in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Of good and faithful kings of Israel, of prophets and leaders, it is written, "and the Lord was with him." Jonah (and many others) found that he could not run away from the presence of the Lord. And of course, "the Word [of God] became flesh and lived among us" in Jesus ... God's most powerful, intimate, and tangible expression of presence and solidarity with the human race.

We are people who believe that God is always with us, always has time for us, listens to us, knows us, wants only and everything good for us... and that, far from withdrawing from us, is at work in our hearts and in the community of the church to bring about healing and reconciliation;

As people who have been given this gift of presence we are – or ought to be – uniquely equipped to understand the healing power of presence. We know what it's meant to us to hold on to the promise that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:39) We know how meaningful it is to sense the presence of God in things as diverse as a peaceful lake, a child's smile, or the bread of communion. We know what it is to feel the presence of God in the community of faith when we sing and pray together, when we surround each other with support, when we discern together what it is Jesus would have us do. We know that we are not alone.

And isn't that something everyone needs to know? People who are dying are usually more afraid of being alone than of death itself. We all want to know that we are not alone.

In a world where old folks are lonely, where customers hardly look at cashiers and waiters who serve them, where so many people have no one to really listen to them, where frequently we see only stereotypes and appearances rather than real and unique individuals, where we so often overlook both beauty and need ... presence is a gift that can bless and transform.

This is a gift our faith gives us, a gift we can carry in any place or situation. It's a two-fold gift. We can be the people who bring with us an awareness of God's presence. It might be expressed in wonder or gratitude, it might stir up compassion, it might be a door to guidance in a tough situation. Sometimes, that awareness might change everything.

And then, there is this other interesting thing the Bible says about the presence of God in the world. Paul writes to the church in Corinth (and to us) "YOU are the body of Christ."

In other words, we carry with us into the world, not just our awareness of divine presence, but the very presence of Christ. We are, maybe not the only way, but a big part of how the world

knows the presence of God. Which means we have not just a way to be in the world, but an important reason for being.

I love this quote which has been attributed to St. Theresa of Avila:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body..
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

The life Jesus calls us to is not a life of safe distance, pretense, superficial conversations, glossed-over problems, and minimal involvement. We know this because he said, "follow me," and *his* path was certainly not one of polite detachment.

The world does not need us to solve all the problems there are or to have the answers to every question. I don't mean to say that solving problems and answering questions aren't important; they are, and there is a time for us to take part in that work. But the world has lots of people trying to provide answers and solve problems and fix things (or at least telling others how to do so!). What the world needs most from the people of God is that we simply *be* there ... fully present, listening, accepting, open-hearted... living in the presence, *being* the presence of Christ.

Resources:

"Stop Googling. Let's Talk" by Sherry Turkle, *The New York Times*, September 26, 2015