

Can't Separate

You know I never thought I would live in a time when it was a kindness that if I saw someone on the street I would walk as far as possible away from them, that we would wave and both appreciate the gesture. I never thought would be kindness to consider not showing up and gathering with friends and family. This past week we saw a trail by our neighborhood blocked off with signs, and also a police officer standing guard so that no one would be on the trails. The public parks have been shut down. And it for sure is a different time. Welcome to the current era with COVID-19. We have all learned a new verb called **social distancing**. And for good reason. Not just out of respect for the leaders of our communities and in government, but also out of love for our neighbors. We do not wish that anyone would contract COVID-19 and we hope to be doing our part in order to keep others safe. I pray that you and your families would stay safe during this time.

But it's not just that we are separated from people we are separate from a lot of life that is normal for us. We are separated from school and work. We are separated from our regular planning. This past week was supposed to be Opening Day in the Chicago area - some of you felt being separated from Wrigley or Guaranteed Rate Bank Field. Perhaps you grilled out and watched re-runs to relive what it's supposed to feel like. And yes for us as a church family we are separated from each other physically unable to give high fives and hugs. We know the time we meet in person will come again. In fact I saw a video of what it might be like when we do meet again. (Chris Farley) Where are my huggers. But *this is a time of unprecedented separation.*

This era reminds me of Bible times and specific disease called leprosy. Leprosy was a disease that was highly contagious and that could be deadly. They say it leads to nerve damage to the point you can't feel pain, and so you could lose eye sight cause you do not blink, and fingers and noses because you do not feel rats gnawing on them. And once you had contracted it - you had to be part of quarantine called a leper colony. In fact if you had it you had to go around yelling unclean unclean, in order to protect those around you. You could not live with family members if they didn't have it, couldn't be by friends. Which is why when a group of lepers called out to Jesus for help and he healed them - you can imagine their joy. Yes I get to go home. I get to have a job. I get to go to the park. I get to have freedom and life because Jesus healed my disease. That is the same Jesus reigning right now. And with a word can bring an end to the disease. This is the Jesus that can and will lead us out of this era, but be with us in the meantime.

So I wanted to welcome you if you've joined us online. Can we have a moment to say hi. Say hi in the chat box and I will respond. I wanted to welcome you if it's your first time in this church family or 500th time. I wanted to welcome you if you don't consider yourself a Christian or don't know. You're welcome here and you are loved. We believe in Jesus. We believe in a God who is with us now and in control, we believe in a love so good it doesn't disappoint.

We are continuing this thought of “Not afraid.” And this time also reminds me of Jesus with his disciples in the midst of a storm. They all thought they were going to die. And look at the disciple Mark’s recounting, “He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (40) I wonder what Jesus would say of us. Do you think with the power of the Spirit we could respond differently? If willing repeat after me, “I pick faith not fear. I am not afraid because of Jesus.”

And I wanted to give you a sweet section of Scripture to meditate on and put in your mind this week. And I thought of perhaps none better than Romans chapter 8. Now this is the chapter that starts off saying there is no condemnation for those in Jesus. It goes on to say we may groan on earth for a little while, but heaven is our home and we won’t groan there. It is the chapter with the most quoted promise, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” And the chapter that reminds us - no quarantine, no shelter at home mandate, no COVID-19 can separate us from the love of God. I invite you to follow along online. Say at home, “I am not separated from God’s love.”

So this past year at the Blumer household was a big one. It is the year our daughter Bella graduates 8th grade and in our household that is the time of year we buy a cell phone. I know every household handles this issue a bit differently. 8th grade seemed good for us. And a cell phone is a big deal for a lot of reasons. First of all they change your life, and it surely has for Bella during quarantine as she is now able to communicate with friends. But also they are expensive as some parents can attest.

Now imagine a scenario Bella comes and is concerned I will continue to give her what she needs. Let’s say she’s upset and crying and she says, “Dad, Dad. Tomorrow are you still going to make sure we have food for breakfast. Dad, Dad. I grew out of my shoes and have nothing to wear will you get me a new pair. Dad, Dad. If I we lose our house will I still have a place to sleep” And I could say Bella - I just gave you a cell phone. It’s a big thing and a big deal. Of course I will give you the lesser things. Like food, shoes, and a place to stay.

Track with me. It’s easy right now to say during COVID-19. “God, God tomorrow are you going to make sure we have food for breakfast and enough to survive on? God, God, will you make sure I still have clothes. God, God will you make sure I have a place to stay.” And what is his response? He doesn’t say I gave you a big thing like a cell phone. What does he say he gave us? v.32 “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” See what Paul is doing is reminding us how much God gave. It’s one thing to buy your kids expensive gifts. It’s another thing to give us Jesus. God who gave the greater gifts will surely give us the lesser. God who sacrificed his only Son for our sakes - he will graciously give us all things. *Nothing can separate you from God’s provision.*

Our government just signed a \$2 trillion dollar stimulus package. If you make less than \$99,000 I believe you will be receiving some sort of check from our government. Companies are changing their product line - switching from how much can we profit to how much can we help. Banks and lenders are delaying payments for when mortgages are due. All of these measures can be helpful if in need, it may even be what God is using or will use to sustain some. But regardless of what banks do, or our government leaders do - remember you have a good Father.

Jesus reminded us of this when he said, “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:11-13) This is your God right now, in the coming days, in the coming months. He has yet to give snakes and scorpions, but can and will continue to give us all we need. There is more we will not be separated from.

This past week I was hearing of someone who was around a person with COVID-19 and who got on a plane and had to tell the crew he was around a person with the disease. He had moments ago found out he was at a conference round table with someone who got sick. And he said it was interesting how quickly things changed. The looks he got from the other passengers, the flight attendants. They were probably thinking - how could you! Why are you on this flight! You are a bad, bad person. There may have been some angry and accusing because he was a potential carrier. He said he felt like a leper. Can you imagine if that were you. A carrier of COVID-19. How bad you would feel, how those glares would sear your skin.

Spiritual speaking we carry something worse than COVID-19 and that is our sin. And God is very clear about the consequences of being a carrier of sin. The prophet Isaiah said, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” (59:2) So God could be like the flight attendant trying to keep distance. Like the other passengers hiding their faces not trying to breathe the same air. And that would be the case for all of us. For all of us have been faithless, loveless, and mean. All of us have been carriers of sin.

But then there is Jesus. And we may not yet have a cure for those carrying COVID-19. But we have found a cure for those carrying sin. It is in the blood of Jesus. And because Jesus was a carrier of grace we don't have to live separated from God, or under the weight of his accusations. No Jesus took weight of our guilt and our shame to the cross where he died. And because he bore separation from his Father, it meant we wouldn't be separated - but live united with him through faith. Praise Jesus for carrying grace for us and for all. You have to love how Paul put it in our lesson, “Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” (34) You know there is one who had the right to condemn us. There is the Judge of the World - it is Jesus. But the very one who will judge is the one who died to pay our punishment, and rise to assure us it is done, and it is now defending our case before the Father. Hallelujah and amen. So I can assure you. *Nothing can separate you from the peace you have in Jesus.*

And imagine something with me. If we didn't carry the virus but carried the cure for COVID-19. Imagine that our congregation called Amazing Love had the cure. It was a cure that eliminated the disease and the pain and the threat of death like that. And we had so much of it - we could give it to the 100,000 plus in the US and across the world and we'd still have enough. We'd put Frankfort on the map if that were us. Everyone would have heard of this church called Amazing Love.

But we have something better. Not the cure for COVID, but the cure for sin. We like Jesus are now carriers of grace. We who have been put at peace and united with the Father - can tell everyone his blood covers all. He is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. If you've felt separated from God - you need to know - no longer! Yes we will continue to Reach the Lost

with the Love of Christ - because that love is the cure! Long after everything goes back to normal we will still be carrying the greatest cure in the world. Where sinners no longer have to be separated from God, but can be at peace.

But there's more to talk about and I think we need dwell deep on this that *Nothing can separate us from the love of God.*

Have you ever done anything out of love for someone and nothing could get in the way. If you'll permit a story. I remember back in college at the height of love when I was going to surprise Kat by coming back to college early. But the day I picked to travel back for Spring Break there was a winter storm advisory. I'm traveling from Wisconsin to MN. Now at first when the snow falls it's pretty. Then after a while you had to stay in the line where the snow had been cleared out. Then it turned into star wars warp speed as you were driving. When I hit La Crosse it really got bad. I was going up and down the bluffs and there are times when I can't see more than 5 feet in front of the car. After this I hear the radio give a blizzard warning. Get off the roads if you are driving get off the roads. Turn the radio off. Finally the blizzard stops I can see, and what's left a sheet of pure ice. For the rest of the trip I've never seen so many cars in the snow. 3 hours in ice going 35 mph. But nothing was going to stop me from seeing the girl I love.

If you think that is dedication just think of our Savior, Jesus going to the cross. He sets out resolutely for Jerusalem. It starts with Judas leaving, and then the arrest. The trial and false accusations. The mocking, the flogging, and then the cross. Yet he would go to Golgatha and he would give his life to prove to us nothing will stand in the way of my love for you and nothing will stand in the way of my victory for you. I love the verse 35 that says, "What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trouble or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" Will COVID-19 or a possible recession, will quarantine or changed plans change how God feels and how he can get through - absolutely not. The God who let nothing stand in the way of his love and plans for us then, will be the same God letting nothing stand in the way of his love and plans now.

In fact it seems these problems are not just barriers but opportunities to reach people. I consider all the reach online platforms are having. Did anyone else consume more devotions and Word of God and worship this past week? Just me? Got a chance to hear devotions from my brother in law, table talk with brother. See worship from 5 or 6 locations - how awesome. You know even our Amazing Love Facebook page last week had over 50,000 views for 2 of it's posts on Psalm 23, and Psalm 46. How amazing. It reminds me of this post. How great that many are finding God during this time. When did the prodigal come home - when every other option was exhausted and he ran out of money. And what did the Father do. Welcomed him with open arms and threw a feast.

One final thought before we go. You know Chicago is a baseball town. I miss opening day and going to Wrigley. And some great years are 2005 and 2016. The Sox won the Series in 2005 and Cubs in 2016. I still have the Chicago Tribune paper commemorating the victory. And some other memorabilia. These World Series wins are something than can never be taken away. And yet at the same time these wins don't give me too much besides memories and fading memorabilia.

2000 years ago the victory Christ won was sealed and can never be taken away. And while I may not benefit much from Cubs or Sox win. I benefit so much from Jesus victory. It's a victory that brings with it each day wonderful knowledge of sins forgiven. Wonderful status as child of God. And a wonderful future because as Jesus rose so I shall too and reign with him in his kingdom. It's because of this victory that Paul writes, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." We have a victory. And *nothing can separate you from the victory of Jesus.*

During this time of social isolation and social distancing, may you know you are not separate from the things that truly matter. From God's gracious provision which will meet your needs, from God's peace through the forgiveness of sins, from God's love as nothing would stop him, and from the victory that will culminate someday with him. Let's close with prayer:

Father I thank you that you have not left me during this time. I ask that you would assure me of your power to watch over and take care of me. Forgive my sins and my doubts - and sustain me past future struggles and doubts. Help me to see that nothing can get in the way of you being good to me as my Father, and you being in control as God. We ask according to your will a quick end to COVID-19, but trust you in the meantime. Amen.