

## So Spiritual Distance

May 3, 2020 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: John 21:1-19*

Way back in December and right around the holidays, our household ended up with two sets of gag cocktail napkins that had been sitting in a drawer, until recently. What's written on them might as well have been prophecy! The one set was given to us by a relative. It reads *Forced Family Fun*. Anyone know the feeling? If not adults then maybe kids or teens cooped up at home playing one too many board games? I couldn't resist buying the other set when I first saw it, even back then. It reads: *What Wine Pairs Best with Living in a Dystopian Nightmare?* I can't see or hear you, but I trust at least some of you are chuckling. I wonder what Jesus would think if we were to slip that second one under a communion cup. Don't worry, I haven't!

The fact is that many of the Jesus's followers were living with their necks under the boot of a violent and oppressive empire such that they may have felt as though they were living through a dystopian nightmare, or at least the end of times, and how much more so after witnessing the events of Good Friday. Just consider all the apocalyptic imagery in scripture, Hebrew Bible and New Testament. In our passage for today, we meet the disciples a week or two after that terror of Good Friday and the shock and confusion of Easter morning. After having been an eyewitness first to the cross, then to the empty tomb, after having encountered the Risen One twice those houses behind closed doors, Peter's had it. He says here: 'That's it. I'm going fishing.'

Now, we don't know why he says this. Was it because he was desperate to get back to work, struggling to make ends meet? Again, anyone know the feeling? Was it because he needed a sense of doing something normal, even the "forced family fun" of doing something/anything with his brothers in Christ while they waited to see what came next? Was it because he was overwhelmed by the trauma and grief and uncertainty of recent events and he just needed the distraction for a time, a break from pondering the new world and new demands that were emerging around him? Whatever the case, I trust most of us can relate. If not fishing, I wonder what your go-to, get-away-from activity has been. Cocktails, anyone? Netflix? Hyper-organizing your apartments and households? Or maybe throwing yourself all the more into work if you've still got it? Who's with me?

Like us now, the disciples are in what theologians and scholars of religion would call a "liminal space." And for most of us, these are very hard places to be. They were living at the boundary or the threshold between a world they knew well and one they could hardly recognize. Whether following a death, divorce or a move, these are spaces of profound transition, both terrifying on the one hand, full of grief over what's been lost, and yet also, somehow full of grace and beauty and even new possibility, *if* we can sit in the midst of it, *if* we can learn from it and not look away. Richard Rohr writes of the experience of liminality: "It seems that it is only when what we are used to is taken away from us that we awaken to new possibilities, even if they were available all along." He also writes: "liminal spaces.... enable us to see beyond ourselves to the broader and more inclusive world that lies before us. When we embrace liminality, *we choose hope* over sleepwalking, denial, or despair. The world around us becomes again an enchanted universe."

In our story from John, a funny thing happens. Jesus shows up again, this time on the beach. No judgment. No sense of "why didn't you or why aren't you doing more?" Instead, he meets them right

where they are offers them a few fishing tips. And here's where it gets even funnier Peter, the moment he recognizes who it was seemingly freaks out! The text says he puts *on* his clothes, because he was naked, and then jumps in the water! Weird move, right? He's got it backwards. Usually we take off our clothes before swimming! It's like he's not ready to *choose hope*! Not yet! Jesus is unphased by Peter's little meltdown. He tells the rest of them where to find the fish and they haul it in. And then, as if to tell them all, "calm down", "just breath," he says, "Come. Have breakfast!" Let's talk! And there on the shore, he breaks bread and again they all recognize him. Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us.

Well, here we are again, our seventh Sunday apart. I wonder if even a day has gone by when any of us has not heard or uttered the expression, "Social Distancing." There is more space between us than there has ever been and on top of that there's also this profound space of liminality, between what has been and whatever comes next, between the world as it was and what new and different futures and patterns have yet to emerge. Like Peter, some of us are freaking out. Some of us aren't ready to choose hope. Yet, can we imagine Jesus saying to us all, "It's o.k.! Calm down. Breathe. Come, have breakfast! Come, sit down and let's talk! We can talk about what comes next. And here's the thing: it involves a possibility that has been there all along! It's simple. And then he says it -- three words, three times -- Feed my sheep! Hold that thought.

I've reconnected lately with a dear old college friend named Randy. He's a community organizer in New York City and has committed the better part of the last two decades to fighting for workers' rights and he's still at it. At his wedding many years ago, the rabbi who had known for Randy for years and who was about to become Randy's father-in-law, gave Randy one of the finest compliments I've ever heard. He said: "Randy, there is no spiritual distance between you and the most oppressed worker." No spiritual distance! What a testimony! And as much as it was meant as a compliment, it was also an ongoing charge for Randy, and for all us in attendance, to always be closing the spiritual distance that separates us one from another. You can imagine, with all the talk of social distancing, I've been holding this story and phrase in mind a lot lately. It comes to mind again today, because of where our scripture goes next, and because it's feeding Sunday, when we celebrate the work and relationships made possible because of our feeding ministries here at First Church.

First, were Kate Layzer here today, and for that matter her husband Don, or our Shelter Director Jim Stewart, or any of the Shelter staff who are downstairs as we speak, or any Shelter, or the Friday Cafe and Outdoor Church volunteers, I would want to pass along to them that same compliment, not because they deserve it, which they do, but simply because I know it to be true! If you are watching, over the course of your ministries, and in these past weeks at this time of social distancing especially, by virtue of your intentions and direct service, there's been no spiritual distance between you and the most vulnerable in your care. No spiritual distance between you and our Friday Cafe guests, no spiritual distance between you and/our Shelter guests, or the wider homeless community whom you've been feeding and serving and advocating for with remarkable resolve. Thank you, Jim and Dennis and Steve and Joe, and Jan and Don and the entire shelter team of staff and volunteers for being here and covering shifts tirelessly to keep the shelter open 24-7 and now, in addition to that extra work, to distribute meals 4 nights a week to the wider community! Thank you, Kate and Don who were here on Friday to hand, out sandwiches, just hours after learning that that Don's mom died. Thank you Alex Steinert Evoy and Holly Marple and other volunteers who were helping!

Part of the reason why these ministries work is because together, with the support First Church, we've created a space where people who are already living daily with a profound sense of social distance,

people who live in liminal spaces day in and day out, can come and find a sense of spiritual closeness and proximity and dignity and care even in these strange times for us all! And allow me to take this chance as well to say to first responders, hospital and homecare workers and therapists and chaplains, I believe the same can be said of you, too! There is no spiritual distance between you and the most vulnerable in your care! When we can gather again, we will have a Healing Sunday, where we will thank you too, for doing your jobs, for not letting your fears get in the way of doing what needs to be done. Your dedication and commitment through this time tells us and the world that, despite whatever mask and protective equipment or telehealth set-ups and other protocols, there is no spiritual distance between you and the most vulnerable who are in your care! We are inspired by it all!

I can't help but wonder as we are coming through this liminal time ourselves, doing our parts to maintain social distancing protocols, if we all can't hear a charge, a commission, from Jesus and from each of your examples, to start tending to and closing the spiritual distance between us and anyone who is hungering for food, or healing or friendship! You see I hear in our passage the Risen Christ offering to Simon Peter and to all of us a similar charge. "Do you love me?" he asks three times. "Then feed my lambs." "Tend my sheep." "Feed my sheep!" As in, 'if you love me, go and become the good shepherd that I have been, and do your part to love and feed any or all who are hungry! Get over your freakouts, your shame, your sleepwalking denial and listen to what I'm telling you! I'll make it as simple as possible. Feed my sheep! Feed each other!' Today, I hear this as 'go and live your life so that there is no spiritual distance between you and anyone who is hungry, for food, for healing, for friendship! Go out and act your life in love until you've closed every last gap! Feed my sheep and let there be no spiritual distance between you and others!'

Finally, friends, this, I believe, is what Communion is all about. This is what the Risen Christ's invitation to join him for breakfast on the beach is all about. It's a ritual that draws us into liminal space, space between the bread of our Outdoor Church and Friday cafe sandwiches that we serve and the bread of heaven that Christ offers us! It draws us into and closes the space between a simple cup of grape juice or wine and the cup of our salvation, the cup of endless joy! In fact, ask me today *what wine pairs best with the dystopian nightmare?* I'd say this one, right here on this table! Why? Because it reminds us of what matters most. It wakes us up from our sleepwalking and denial and distraction. It reminds us that even in a time of social distancing there need be no spiritual distance between us and Jesus, no spiritual distance between us and the great cloud of witnesses who surround us, no spiritual distance between us and one another! And, as importantly, it prompts us to close whatever gaps there may still be.

When 74% of prisoners are testing positive for Covid 19, there is an unconscionable spiritual distance between us and literally millions of incarcerated people! When food pantry lines are already a mile long after just over a month of this crisis, there is an unconscionable distance between us and those in this country who are food insecure! When the Navajo Nation is behind only New York and New Jersey for the highest infection rate in the US. When right here in the People's Republic, the Covid 19 case rate is almost three times for black people what it is for white people, the spiritual distance between whites and persons of color, and its long legacy, is unconscionable.

But the Risen One comes to us now, meets us right in midst of this collective liminal space we are all in. First with gentle invitation. Then with clear instruction about what comes next for all of us. I see him saying to us: 'Listen to me, Christian! Listen to me pretty much all of America! It's the dawn of a new day! Here's another chance to choose hope, to live the possibility that has been there all along. Feed my sheep! Do something to close that spiritual distance that's been walling you off!' You may not be able

to leave your house now, but you can prepare your hearts, your souls and your checkbooks and your calendars for whatever you will do establish and deepen relationship with those who are most vulnerable. Ready yourselves now for a new and different world where all will be nourished and fed and cared for and free! And let's start here, with this taste of what it can be like, the bread of life that is really life, and the cup of our collective salvation. Amen.



