“Love in the Age of Coronavirus”

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Text: 1 Corinthians 13
Rev. Peter Coutts

This morning I am on day 11 of my voluntary, 14 day self-isolation, following the guidance for those returning from a foreign country. The world for me has shrunk down to 1,500 square feet as I comply with the guidance of Deena Hinshaw (another peculiarity of our times: we all know who is the chief medical officer of the province) . In contrast, our two sons were in Golden skiing last weekend and apparently had a lovely time. In contrast, some people I know just returned from a southern vacation who instantly dismissed the idea of self-isolation. “I’m not sick” they said, even though they returned from the second most affected state in the U.S. In contrast, some are anxiously laying in generous supplies in their home, fearing the worst. As I picked up the paper on Monday morning I was surprised to see that the Calgary Herald still had a Sports section, given the changes there. “Social distancing”—a term I have never heard before—is now constantly heard on the news. As 2019 ended we could not have imagined at all that this would be our reality in 2020. And I NEVER would have guessed that I would one day wonder whether churches would gather for worship on Easter. As I said last week, Lent is a season that invites us into reflection: reflection on God, Christ, the life I live and am called to live. Those reflections are now infected by the Covid 19 virus, and appropriately so. How does this reality influence how we live our lives as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven?

Last week I heard someone say that there has been two outbreaks resulting from the pandemic: a health crisis and a relational crisis. This reality is illustrated most poignantly when a family member is infected with the virus. Everyone becomes isolated in their home, whether they are infected or not. The 2 meter social distancing rule applies. You aren’t to share cups and plates. You aren’t to hug or kiss your children to comfort them in that anxious time. Suddenly our new experience is making clear how much life depends on touch, contact, togetherness, gathering, sharing. We can suddenly realize that this is a big part of how we express love.

When we reflect as the people of God on the idea of love, our thoughts can go immediately to Paul’s great definition of love found in 1 Corinthians 13. Every passage of scripture we read is interpreted and shaded by our point of view and by our context. The most common context for reflecting on 1st Corinthians 13 is certainly weddings. So we hear the passage in the context of love expressed in the joy of married life and family life. But how do we read this passage and think about love in the age of coronavirus?

The core of the definition is three verses in the middle of the chapter, which starts with the words “love is…” What follows are not philosophical or idealistic words. The definition that follows is practical. Love, in this definition, is not a feeling. It is a practice. Love is something you do. I find it really interesting to consider these practices through the lens of the pandemic. Love “does not insist on its own way” it says. Six hours after I arrived home from Hawaii I heard our chief medical officer give guidance that people returning to Canada from any country were

encouraged to self-isolate for 14 days. What? But I have a job. I have been called into a ministry by God to care for people in their need (and this is a time of need!). I have plans. People expect me to be in the pulpit in 3 days! Paul's answer is that love does not insist on its own way. So far I have not experienced any symptoms of Covid 19. But is it not an expression of love to isolate myself to ensure that I don't give this virus to another, however slight the chances seem? Self isolation is the last thing I want to do, but: love does not insist on its own way. I express care for others by not being around them.

Interesting, isn't it, to read this familiar definition through a lens shaped by the coronavirus? So here I am holed up in my basement office. Paul goes on with the definition with another practical point: "Love is not resentful." Huh! We can imagine how easy it can be to feel resentful in isolation. Love is not envious, Paul writes. Again, we can imagine how easy it can be to feel envious of (say) my kids who are still free to head out skiing! But if we think about self isolation as an expression of care for others, they it becomes an act of goodwill… an act of charity towards others. In the same line the definition says "it is not irritable." Hmmm. We think of irritability as a feeling, don't we? But in this definition Paul is suggesting that acting out our irritability is not loving. This I get personally as my partner in isolation is my dear wife. How easy it would be for our irritability acted out to roughen up our interactions hour by hour….making the isolation period harder.

I think it is noteworthy, in general terms, that Paul commences this practical definition of love with the words "love is patient; love is kind." Of all the things that love means to us… of all the things Paul could focus on first, he chose these two specific practices for us to think about first. Over the years, looking again and again at this definition, I have come to see this opening statement as a key, core directive in understanding and expressing love. "Love is patient; love is kind." Give to others kindness. Receive from others with patience. Every relationship is filled with the back and forth motion of words and deeds. Think of these two qualities—kindness and patience—as lubricants for that back and forth motion of words and deeds. Move forward with kindness, receive back with patience. To move forward with kindness—especially if it costs us in some way to do it—is an act of grace. To receive with patience whatever comes at us from another—even if it is frustrating or hurtful—is an act of grace. The root word in the Greek word for grace means "goodwill." An act of grace is to foster goodwill…and certainly kindness and patience fosters that.

How we understand love is so wrapped up in touch, contact, togetherness, gathering, sharing. Those things are being disrupted, and that disruption is pushing us to imagine new ways of expressing love in the age of Coronavirus. Think about what may well be an increasing number of people who are and will be living in isolation. What can you do for them: people in need who need practical expressions of love? Can you walk your neighbour's dog? Or offer to pick up some groceries for them when you run out to get your groceries? In the 1980's AT&T had a slogan for promoting long distance telephone calls: "reach out and touch someone." Pick up the phone daily and call the isolated person, just for a simple chat, and break the monotony and loneliness of that person's day. If it does anything else, Paul's definition reminds us that love is practical. So do practical things.

I am also mindful of our frontline medical workers. 20 years ago I talked to a woman who had worked as a nurse at the height of the polio epidemic. She worked on the polio ward of the hospital in Medicine Hat. She told me that at one point, one out of every six of their patients were her colleagues. Imagine! At a time when every Canadian is being encouraged to stay isolated as much as possible there is a group of our fellow citizens who are in contact with the infected or possibly infected, every day. Pray for them. And if you know a health care worker—whether they work with Covid 19 patients or not—call them up and thank them for their service.

One last thing about Paul's practical expression of love that is certainly pertinent to our age. He concludes this 4 verse definition with these words: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." This is now a time of growing anxiety. People are worrying about the health of themselves and their families. They are worried about the financial market crash and the impact that has on their savings. They are concerned about whether they will be laid off and left without a paycheck. As people who love, one practical thing we can do is encourage people. We can hold firm to our belief that our God is a God of grace who cares. We can help others bear all things. We can help people sustain their hope that these days will pass and things will recover. With this support and encouragement we can help others—and even ourselves—endure. In this way we can demonstrate that love indeed never ends.