

Column

Dementia made it necessary for a long-time church member to go into a care facility. For several years, she maintained her own rather well, but then came the pandemic. Unable to have visitors and alone in her room most of the time, her mental powers declined rapidly.

A year later, she no longer knows her family members, though she remains gracious and continues to enjoy the birds outside of her window.

Would this decline have come about without the pandemic? Likely, but I think it is fair to say that social isolation sped it up and exacerbated it. More than that, her case is just one of many.

Social isolation may have been necessary based on the facts available at the time the pandemic hit; nevertheless, the ‘cure’ took its toll on countless ones such as the dear lady of whom I have just spoken.

As we emerge from this crisis and look back, an old truth has come to the fore: human beings were made for interaction with one another and of the importance of the human touch.

The importance of the human touch is no new discovery. The Bell system proclaimed and promoted it in the 1970s. “Reach out and touch someone” became a staple in their print advertisements and was turned into a song for radio and television.

The ‘touch’ was primarily via telephone, but if you listen carefully to the lyrics the thought of a more incarnate encounter is not left behind: Reach out and touch / Somebody's hand / Make this world a better place / If you can.”

If you think about it, the message of this song is very much in line with what Jesus did and taught in the New Testament. For example, in Matthew 8, He comes upon a leper who calls out: “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.” In response, He “put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean.” The story ends with the man healed and once again able to re-enter society.

Why did Jesus just not pronounce him healed as He had done in other cases? Why the touch? I don’t know for sure, but perhaps it was because this man – as the protocol of the day demanded – had been in social isolation for who knows how long. He had had to live apart from his family and friends. If

he did encounter anyone, he and they had to keep a safe distance – about 16 feet.

Without a doubt, Jesus could have followed the rules, maintained his distance and still healed him, but He chose to do otherwise. Why? Again, I am not sure, for the very good reason that the Bible does not tell us, but I have a hunch it was because this man needed something more: the warmth and touch of a sympathizing hand. And, that is what he received from Jesus.

Jesus' approach was wholistic, and no doubt as His followers ours should be as well. Whom might God be calling you to reach out and touch today? It may be over the telephone, but it may be face-to-face and with a real honest-to-God hug.

For what are you waiting? End isolation (if you have had the vaccine) and embrace Jesus' way!

O GOD, Almighty and merciful, who healest those that are broken in heart, and turnest the sadness of the sorrowful to joy; Let thy fatherly goodness be upon all that thou hast made. Remember in pity such as are this day destitute, homeless, or forgotten of their fellow-men [or alone]. Bless the congregation of thy poor. Uplift those who are cast down. Mightily befriend innocent sufferers, and sanctify to them the endurance of their wrongs. Cheer with hope all discouraged and unhappy people, and by thy heavenly grace. Grant this, O Lord, for the love of him, who for our sakes became poor, thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer)

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