

THE UNNATURAL FEEL OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

Sitting at my desk, facing the street, I see my neighbour Tony, leaf rake in hand. He's chatting with the young couple from down the street who are out walking their dog. They often chat, but today they are standing at an unusual distance apart. It is an unnatural distance they are keeping. Normally, they would be closer – shaking hands, a pat on the arm, a stroke of the dog on the leash. But today it's the age of 'social distancing'.

It looks unnatural. Even from this side of the front fence, it feels unnatural. We have to make a conscious effort to keep our distance, as the new rules dictate.

'Personal distance' is an interesting phenomenon. Most people just seem to know what is needed, what's expected, in terms of how close to stand to others. Acquaintances stay at a certain distance. Friends come a little closer. For family and very close friends, the social distance shortens more.

Some people, of course, don't get the idea of normal social spacing. I have an enthusiastic autistic friend who stands close - I mean really close – when we talk. And some of my other-culture friends also stand just the wrong side of my comfort zone. When someone breaks our unwritten rules of personal space, we feel uncomfortable.

I'm sure we're all familiar with different cultures having different 'personal space' norms. Social researchers have sorted the world into what they call 'contact cultures', like South America, the Middle East and Southern Europe; and 'non-contact cultures', like Northern Europe, North America, Asia. The terms are pretty self-explanatory though quite flexible. In one, the 'personal bubble' is rather larger than in the other, where the bubble shrinks considerably. In Aus, I guess we are a bit each way.

A study published in the Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology in 2018 found that age, climate and gender seem to have some bearing on the norms of social distancing but are not consistent factors. So, as one commentator says, "Keep your distance in Canada, prepare for a hug in Argentina and if you end up on intimate terms with a Norwegian, don't shrink away. They like to stand closer than anybody – to keep warm, perhaps."

Why does it feel odd?

Even knowing the capacity for contagion of Covid 19, it still feels odd to be keeping an unsociable distance from others. It's not just my cultural and social conditioning, or because it is novel (pardon the pun). It's because we've been made to be social beings.

The bible gives us the picture of God himself as a social being. We have coined the word 'trinity' to describe what we read. Together – if I can talk like this – together God plans, he decides, he sees, he feels, he loves, he acts. Then he created humankind 'in his own image' – to be able to do the same sort of things. It was sort of like heaven. God and his people enjoyed each other's company, sitting together in the cool of the evening, perhaps in conversation, perhaps in companionable silence. Together as friends.

This happy beginning came to a crushing end, though, when the people exercised their gift of decision-making against advice and against good sense. They chose to usurp God's role of arbiter of right and wrong. As Don Carson says, "They de-godded God". Suddenly and terribly, conscience came alive, trust was broken, shame intruded into social intercourse, fear gripped the heart, relationship was destroyed, social distance became the norm. The world was changed forever.

But that was not the end of the story. From true love and grace, God enacted his plan of reconciliation – the cross. Through the cross, God himself carries the load. Conscience is cleared. Trust is remade. Shame is covered. Relationship is restored. Distance becomes intimacy. Death is defeated. Fear is banished in faith.

And that's the gospel of the God who loves the world, even this broken and diseased world.

Now, the current requirement of social distancing brings all this to mind. Distance is not natural. By creation and nature, we are social beings. (Allowing for some notable exceptions, like the eccentric ascetic Simon on the Pole that JR reminded us of recently.)

It also brings to mind a verse like Ephesians 2:13: *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."* The context is different – Paul is talking about people from all ethnic and social backgrounds, coming together to the cross of Christ – trusting Jesus and being saved. Those he called *"far off"* were the Gentiles who were in need of hearing the good news for the first time. Those who were *"near"* were the Jews. They already had the scriptures, the Hebrew Bible that Jesus knew so well. They already had the gospel.

The point is, together we are brought back into right standing with God through the blood of Christ, through the cross. Brought back into fellowship, into friendship and closeness, for eternity.

In the meantime, with social distance so epidemiologically necessary, let's be careful and prayerful for each other, and praise the Lord that he is still working out his marvellous and awesome plans.