

Thoughts on this Present Pandemic

by Pastor John Mochel

It has been just about two months now since our society began shutting down. It seems strange to say it that way because so many things are still going. But it is the personal interaction between people outside of immediate family that has largely been eliminated. Sitting, talking, shaking hands, having lunch together, going out for a cup of coffee, church work projects, youth group adventures, singing together, hugging good friends... all gone.

I have noticed that; in our public discussion, news media, pundits, experts, and internet conversation regarding all of this; there has been an unfortunate lack of personal reflection. This is alarming considering how much we did not know two months ago and how much we still do not know. You would think that thoughtful people might approach the entire situation with a little humility. Not so.

Arrogance and polemics seem to be the order of the day. It is the lockdown liberals (an oxymoron?) in opposition to the resistance conservatives. I do not want to be either of those.

As I recall the first real feeling of societal change came when President Trump banned travel from China. The Democrats howled “racism” and attacked Trump, as usual. Then he closed travel from Europe, and they all howled again. Turned out Trump was right. Then he claimed that all of this would go away like magic. It hasn’t. It is safe to say that nearly everyone has been wrong, a lot.

My first thought about the pandemic was that it was much ado about nothing and would go away. After people began getting sick in Italy, I revised my opinion and thought that we needed to shut down just about everything. Others thought so as well, so we did. Some parts of the country sent people into their homes and told them to stay there. Was this legal? We still do not know.

Was it excessive? We are beginning to discover that it may have been, in many places, for many reasons. Probably it kept some people from getting sick. But, was that worth it? We don’t know that yet either. I am wise enough to know that if my understanding of this situation has changed drastically thrice in the past two months, it will certainly change again.

This realization, in itself, ought to keep everyone from being ungraciously critical of others, including President Trump, Republicans, Democrats, New Yorkers, South

Dakotans, and anyone else we might want to belittle for thinking differently than ourselves. We are all trying to figure it out.

I have my opinions, you have yours, and every person needs to live their life according to their best understanding and respect the fears and beliefs of others. So, obey the laws, wear masks around people who want you to wear masks, don't hug people who don't want to be hugged, and no licking! That is the new rule at a daycare here in South Dakota, where people have been remarkably reasonable and considerate.

However, I would like to comment on something that is of increasing concern to a pastor who spends his time in the Scriptures and observing and encouraging people.

At first people advocating lockdowns, social distancing, staying away from others, business closures, and nonessential non-working were talking about a month or two of flattening the curve to protect hospitals from being overwhelmed. I understood that, or thought I did. It turns out that hospitals here have not been overwhelmed. Not even close. In fact, many of the dire predictions have not happened in most places. Were the efforts overkill? Well, we did not know what would happen.

But, now, many people are talking about lifestyle change to protect people from getting sick, societal change lasting much longer. Friends have told me that shaking hands will no longer happen, and hugging? Never. Elderly people and others with health conditions are going to need to self-quarantine for their own safety and activity and travel should be constrained. No big meetings would be allowed, and everyone will need to practice social distancing for years.

This would all be great and save lives if we were not talking about people. After all, what is life? Everyone seems to be thinking about saving lives and how long we want to live. But, have people thought about why they are alive? What happened to living life to the fullest? What happened to western Christian values like freedom and love? Is not life supposed to be full of those things?

I'm 55. This virus probably will not kill me if I get it, but it might. I do not know how much time God will give me. For this reason, I am not willing to give up two or more years of visiting with parents, grandchildren, brothers, good friends, people I love. I've already lost two of my absolute best friends in the whole world. I miss them terribly. It is not worth it to cut myself off from others just to live a little longer myself. I choose a short life full of love and people over a long life alone. I realize that this is an exaggeration. The choice is not this stark, I hope. But it seems like, at the moment, we are way too far over on the "I want to live a little longer" way of thinking.

I really do think that, if I were 85, I would feel the same way. My goal in life has never been to live as long as possible. I am going to die someday, but until I do, I do not want to miss out on life. "Bring over the grandkid now! Not if he has a wretched cough, of course. But if the kid is breathing and rested and not poopy, bring him over!"

I am seeing around me now all kinds of people in the beginning stages of loneliness and depression. Already, nationally, depression, drug abuse, and suicide rates are rising. We don't like living this way. It is not the way God meant us to live. We are supposed to be with people, all kinds of people, different kinds of people. We are made by God to serve people, reach out to people, be in fellowship with people, love people, hug people. I wonder if, in the long run, we will lose more people by isolating ourselves than from this virus.

Am I trying to advocate for some new national policy? No. Am I criticizing Trump or the Democrats? No. I think I understand why Dr. Fauci does what he does and why Nancy Pelosi does what she does and why Trump does what he does. Frankly, they are all pretty much doing their jobs.

Nor am I advocating running about everywhere, maskless, shouting in faces, protesting or being irresponsible or disrespectful. If you are with someone or in someone's store or home and they want you to wear a mask, do so. Wash your hands often. Protect people around you if you can. This is simply basic kindness and humility. It is considering others more important than yourself. Moreover, we need to care for the sick, not avoid them. The Bible tells us all of this.

The present pandemic has caused many people, maybe most people, to be scared to get together with friends and family. In some places, we are surrounded by social pressures prepared to shame people who get out. Some people think that this fear is a good thing, that it saves lives. Most of the media, obviously petrified themselves, have been promoting fear. Fear and anger increase their audience. I think this is a shame. Fear is rarely a good thing unless it is fear of God, which, quite possibly, is the point of the entire worldwide pandemic.

I would say that people don't know what they're missing, but they do. They know exactly what they are missing and it's killing them. I don't want people I love to miss out on living, on their kids and grandkids and brothers and sisters and moms and dads and good friends and having coffee together and people at church who all make life worthwhile. I really think that when your life is at its end, whenever that might be, you will not regret spending time with people.