
Social Distance for the Common Good: Namaste

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Lent 3 – Year A

Grace to you and peace, in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Welcome to prayer! Welcome to the Spirit! Welcome to the Holy Spirit of God, who holds us close no matter where we are. Welcome to love!

The gospel passage for this Sunday, The Third Sunday of Lent, tells the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Many of us know that story, and I will not examine it closely today. But, I do want to use that famous verse of Jesus to orient my own remarks: "God is Spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4.24).

On this day when the Cathedral is livestreaming our Sunday service, even I am not inside the Cathedral. I greet you from The Point of the Cathedral of St. Philip, property which is outside the building and which overlooks magnificent Peachtree Road, the road which some say is the backbone of Atlanta.

I have always felt this point to be a place of wonder and responsibility, a place of joy and service. Today, it is also a mountain of spirit and truth.

To the woman at the well, Jesus said that the time will come when the true worshippers will worship God neither on this mountain nor on that one! When we are in the spirit, the place makes little difference, even a grand place like the Cathedral of St. Philip. What makes a difference is spirit and truth. I want to speak about spirit and truth today.

Let's look at truth first. We in Atlanta, and in the United States, and across the world, are in the midst of a serious pandemic, an outbreak of a new infectious disease called COVID-19. It is a virus that spreads quickly and almost without prediction. It is serious. It will not be lethal for most of us, but it can be deadly for some of us. Sadly, some of us are probably carrying the infection right now, without knowing it and without showing any symptoms. Sadly, some of us will get it soon.

In the midst of this outbreak, the Centers for Disease Control recommends that faith-based communities cancel gatherings of over 250 people. In this kind of crisis, I trust the CDC; and I encourage all of us to trust their wisdom and guidance. Please practice social distancing! Please wash your hands, over and over again.

All this is truth. It does no good to deny truth. This parish, the Cathedral of St. Philip, seeks to gather in truth, and we seek to worship in truth. It is part of our character, part of our identity, to be people of truth, from wherever truth comes.

But the Cathedral, and all of good faith Christianity, contains another character and identity. We are people of the Spirit. We are people of the Holy Spirit of God. We contribute a different element into a world of uncertainty and fear. That element is faith in the goodness of God and faith in the holiness of all God's people.

It was faith in the holiness of God's people that prompted Jesus to engage a foreign woman, a Samaritan woman, at the well in John chapter 4. Following the example of Jesus there and elsewhere, Christians of good faith and of good will have not been afraid to reach out to other people, to trust and to love other people, to serve others. That is our heritage and our identity.

We are restricting our gathering in community during this season, in the interest of the common good. It is for the common good that we distance ourselves, physically, from each other. We are practicing social distance for the common good. It is a way of loving our neighbor! It is a way of loving each other.

Personally, of course I have always been opposed to closing churches! I go to church on Sundays, wherever I am, because I am empowered by the faith of people, people who round up the energy to walk on Sundays, who gather with each other, rich and poor, black and white, even healthy and unhealthy. My spirit needs that kind of holy engagement.

Today, however, it is better, far better, and far healthier, to suspend our gatherings together.

Christians of truth and spirit believe something deeper. We believe that this physical withdrawal from each other, this social distancing, is for a season. This situation, and this season of social distancing, will not last forever. There will be an end.

I look forward to the conclusion of our social distancing. But, the truth is that the conclusion is not at all here yet. Indications are that these measures are only the beginning of our journey together. We must face that reality forthrightly and honestly.

Still, we do not need to be afraid of it. "Be not afraid," are the words of our God, through angels and through humanity, in some of the most familiar words of our holy scripture.

One of the most important features of our Sunday gatherings is the Passing of the Peace. In a season of social withdrawal and social distancing, passing the peace of Christ is even more important. We can learn today, and in this season, something deeply powerful about the peace. Here is what we can learn: the passing of the peace is not always physical at all!

Peace is not in the heartiest hand shake you can produce, or in the tightest hug you can manage, or in the wildest backslap. Peace is in our eyes. Peace is in your eyes. Peace is in my eyes. Even if we cannot touch each other physically at the Peace, we can look at each other. We can signal, with our eyes, and with our bows, that something deep and holy is holding us together, even in a season of anxiety and uncertainty.

I have recently been using another word for peace and for greeting. And I offer it to us today. It is the foreign word, *Namaste*. In some cultures across the world, friends and strangers greet each other not with a hand shake but with a gesture of holding the palms together, fingers pointing upward, rather a prayer posture, and with the gentle word, *Namaste*.

Namaste means, literally, "I bow to you." It is a word and gesture of respect and honor and love. It means, essentially, "The holy in me bows to the holy in you." It is exactly what some of us mean when we say, "The Christ in me meets the Christ in you." It is the passing of a deep peace between us.

Let's try it right now, whether you are with me physically, or not. Palms together, fingers upward: "*Namaste*." I bow to you. The Christ in me meets the Christ in you. "I love and honor you."

From the Cathedral of St. Philip this morning, "Peace be with you." Spirit and truth be with you. Health and wholeness be with you. *Namaste*.

We are in a contagious season. But we Christians have something, indeed people of good faith no matter what religion we are, have something contagious to offer the world that is more powerful than disease or fear or anxiety. We have the contagious peace of Christ.

Please pass that peace to someone today. You do not need to touch them physically. You can deliver God's deep and true peace with your spirit and with your eyes.

Peace Be With You! *Namaste*! May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of Jesus Christ our Lord. And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be upon you, and upon us, wherever we are, and remain with us always. AMEN.

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