



How Are You Responding?

John 15:1-12

Over the last few weeks, life as we know it has been impacted in an unprecedented manner by the rise of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The World Health Organization has highlighted the importance of properly responding to this virulent pandemic, and last week the President extended the guidelines for slowing the spread of the virus for another 30 days. The government has responded with a \$2-trillion rescue package, the economy continues to wrestle with a volatile financial market, unemployment figures are on the increase, schools, restaurants, cinemas, shops, and churches remain closed, and most of us are being careful and staying at home. As we are clearly living in extraordinary times, many of us are anxious, uncertain, and more than a little fearful.

Over the last few months my congregation has been spending our Sunday mornings exploring the Gospel of John. A couple of weeks ago we immersed ourselves in the impactful words of John 15:1-12. As we did, we were powerfully reminded that the words of Scripture often speak directly into our lives.

Last year when I participated in a pastors' conference in Egypt, my son, Michael, who is a photographer, came with me. At the end of the conference, we remained in Egypt for a couple of days and thoroughly enjoyed a brief visit to the pyramids, along with the sights and sounds of ancient Cairo. On one occasion in an old marketplace, Michael took a photograph that turned out to be one of my favorites.

It is a typical Egyptian street scene, filled with real people living real lives. On the left a young girl is walking home from school holding her grandfather's hand. Granddad has presumably given her something to eat and is carrying her bag. They are entirely caught up in their conversation and are clearly enjoying their time together. Behind them is a local market on an



old cobblestone street flanked by timeworn apartment buildings.

So what does this have to do with the coronavirus or John 15? Well let me explain.

This photograph was taken so that your eye is drawn to the ordinary, everyday life of a typical Cairo street scene, with the grandfather and his granddaughter being the main focus of our attention. The background, however, is not as noticeable. It is blurred and unclear; you're tempted to think the background does not really matter. Yet backgrounds are important because they provide context for what is happening.

When we come to a passage of Scripture, we know the foreground is of vital importance, but we should never neglect what is happening in the background. In the case of John 15, Jesus says, "I am the true vine and my father is the gardener." But in order to understand the significance of the words of Jesus, we also need to know that this conversation takes place the night before His crucifixion.

Sometimes when we examine our own lives, we are so caught up with what is happening at that moment that we forget what God is doing beyond the immediacy of the "right now." It is always helpful to slow down and pause and prayerfully ask, "Father, what are You doing in my life right now? Who am I becoming as You work in my life and allow challenges and difficult circumstances to shape me?"

When the circumstances of our lives become challenging, we should resist dividing the foreground and the background, the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the daily

and the divine. Scripture teaches us that they are connected—the seen and the unseen are related to each other; both are important. If we only focus on what is happening in the immediate and the now, then we've lost sight of the unseen, the divine, the eternal, which provide for us perspective and often reveal that God is at work in the unseen and the undetectable.

Today's foreground is the devastating, restrictive nature of the coronavirus. Our thinking and living is dominated by the context of a state of emergency, a volatile economy, unemployment, social and physical restrictions, with schools, restaurants, and shops closed. We are actively listening for and following medical advice. We are rightly concerned, as well as anxious and fearful.

In John 15 in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus wants the disciples to understand the significance of what is about to take place, so He encourages them with a powerful and timely reminder: "Remain in Me, and I will remain in you" (John 15:4).

As we celebrate Palm Sunday and move into Easter week, we look forward to the wonder of the Resurrection. It is worth focusing on the words of Jesus: "Remain in Me." Apply His words to your own contextual backdrop. Focus on the power they contain. Remember that in days of prosperity and in days of adversity, "Remain in Me." On good days and difficult days, "Remain in Me." In days when the financial market is up and days when the market is down, "Remain in Me." Amidst a state of national emergency and social uncertainty, "Remain in Me." When travel is restricted and schools are closed, "Remain in Me." When you long to visit family and friends, see a movie, go to a restaurant, "Remain in Me." When you are tempted to pessimism and skepticism, "Remain in Me." When your patience is running out and you are tempted to surrender to frustration and doubt, "Remain in Me." On Good Friday and on Easter Sunday, "Remain in Me."

I do trust that you and all those you love will continue to be both careful and prayerful, and may the eternal love of God protect you and hold you close this Easter season.