

MONDAY MANNA

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THE 'MISSING' PANDEMIC: MISSING PEOPLE WE CARE ABOUT

By Jim Mathis

Because staying at home during the Covid-19 pandemic seemed wise, I felt like I had aged by a couple of years over the first months. I had not been eating too much or watching too much TV. And it was not because I was not doing anything, because I used the time to focus on projects I had been wanting to do for years. It was because I missed people – being around them, watching them, interacting with them.

I have missed going for coffee or lunch with friends or playing music, but specifically I missed the younger people that are normally part of my day. We attend a large church with a couple of thousand people, most of whom are young. My wife and I are one of the oldest couples there. Sometimes older people will visit, but among the regular participants, we are the oldest or close to it. That means a lot of kids and teenagers running around, and loud, high-energy music.

What I have missed most is the energy in the lobby. Talking with people, happily greeting people I have not seen since the last Sunday, and generally getting recharged for the week. I do not try to remember the kids' names; I just enjoy the activity and young parents trying to keep their toddlers under control. Basically, I have missed face-to-face interaction with people on a regular basis.

It is said we become the average of our five closest friends – becoming like those we spend time with most. If we spend time with smart people who challenge us to read and get better educated, we naturally do that. If our friends are athletes, we will become better athletes. If our friends are arrogant, or slobs, we start following their examples. So, friendships we establish make a great difference in who we become.

Motivational speaker Charlie "Tremendous" Jones often said that we will be the same people five years from now except for the books we read and the people we meet. The Bible, as we might expect, says much about the importance of our relationships with other people. Here are just a few examples:

We were created for relationships. From the beginning, God wanted to enjoy relationships with the people He created, but also recognised we need healthy relationships with other people. *"The Lord said, 'It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'"* (Genesis 2:18).

Loneliness can be a terrible affliction. Just as being with people keeps us motivated, lacking such interaction can be debilitating. *"There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. 'For whom am I toiling,' he asked, 'and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?' This too is meaningless – a miserable business!"* (Ecclesiastes 4:8).

Being with other people brings many benefits. Being able to associate with other people does more than just eliminate loneliness. *"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!... Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken"* (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

Hopefully in the months ahead we will be able to resume spending time with old friends, making new ones, engaging in new and exciting activities, and forming new and positive habits. We have the perfect opportunity to find a new normal. Remember, those we spend the most time with can strongly influence who we are and who we will become. So, choose wisely.

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

How have the restrictions of the pandemic – social distancing, stay-at-home orders, working from home rather than going to work – affected you, especially in terms of your usual interpersonal relationships?

Have you found a decrease or lack of normal social interactions to be a negative influence in how you have felt, mentally, emotionally, or even spiritually? Explain your answer.

What has been the one thing you have missed the most socially during this time? Have you been able to maintain your work productivity, or has it declined due to a limited ability to work and interact with others as a team?

Would you describe yourself more as an extrovert, a person who thrives by being around people, or more of an introvert, someone who can do well even when not interacting with others? How has that affected how you have reacted to the pandemic restrictions many of us have faced?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages:

Proverbs 27:17

Romans 12:3-5

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

2 Corinthians 6:14-17