

Dear Friends,

One of my favorite poems (and there aren't many) is the Starfish Poem by Loren Eiseley. You've probably heard it, but in brief there is an old man walking down a beach covered in starfish that have washed ashore. A young boy is tossing them back one at a time, and the man criticizes the boy, saying he is wasting his time since he can't possibly make a difference for all of them. The boy tosses one in and says "I made a difference for that one."

In these storm-tossed times, sometimes we may feel like the starfish – thrown ashore and struggling to get back to the familiar waves of our respective oceans. Sometimes we may feel like the old man – seeing nothing useful happening or people wasting energy in things that don't make sense. But what if we tried to be more like the boy?

There are plenty of ways to be divisive right now, with no shortage of labels that put people on one side or the other of a make-believe fence. Democrat or Republican; mask or no mask; black, brown, or white; police officer or citizen; teacher or parent. We are quick to label each other in an all-or-nothing fashion. One statement for or against a topic puts you automatically in a box on all topics, when in reality our differences are our strength and should inspire compassion. Christians are called to be above the fray, to rise above contentious rhetoric – not to show everyone how righteous we are (see Luke 18:9-14), but to be role models of Christ-like behavior. The two greatest commandments are to love God, and love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves (Matt 22:36-40). Ouch.

We live in a world of viral pandemic, racial oppression and distrust, civil dissatisfaction, and generally...fear. As a primary care physician, I have seen all of these things play into the health of my patients and my friends. If you lose your job, you might lose your health insurance. If you participate in a protest, you might lose your friends. People may treat you differently if you don't wear a mask, if you do wear a mask, if you go on vacation, or if you have friends over to your front porch. Reports of anxiety and depression in my patients are higher than I have ever seen them, and it all comes back to fear...fear of being isolated or alone, either physically or philosophically. But patients are also more willing to talk about their feelings than ever, opening up voluntarily about their worries and fears in ways I previously couldn't pry out of them...and in medicine just as in spirituality, healing begins with confession. I've been proud of my patients who are willing to answer questions honestly, talk openly, and be just a little vulnerable in order to get the help they need, and if anyone reading this has been feeling sad, withdrawn, easily irritated, or worse – please talk to your doctor, your pastor, or a trusted friend or family member about it. Be vulnerable, lean into your starfish feelings, and allow someone to help you. You cannot properly address a problem unless you talk about it.

So what if we look at current events not as problems, but as opportunities? What if we take on the persona of the boy on the beach? True, I cannot single-handedly fix this pandemic, but I can wear a mask and wash my hands. I don't pretend to understand all the complexities of life as a person of color, but I can have a conversation with people who are and listen to their perspective. I don't know the worries going through the minds of police officers or teachers, but I can ask them.

God calls us to take care of our neighbors...all our neighbors – not just the ones who look like us, the ones who agree with our opinion, or the ones we feel comfortable around. He calls us to care for each other as we would care for Him (Matt 25:34-40). As we see and hear messages from our leaders, co-workers, employers, friends and family, I encourage you to think through two questions: 1) Is this meant to be divisive, or uplifting? 2) Is this calling me to look out for myself, or for others? This is a marathon, not a sprint, and at some point we all will be the boy, the old man, and the starfish. We who call ourselves followers of Christ should strive in every situation to be like the boy and look for ways to help those around us – every cashier, every co-worker, every phone call, every time. We can make the beach better for everyone, and it starts right in front of us.

In Christ,
Aaron Lambert, MD