

Hello Brethren,

Another week, and once again it seems the world has changed dramatically. We are told COVID-19 numbers are rising in many areas. Overall US cases are dropping, although there are increases reported in some states. Worldwide many nations are reporting sizable increases, especially through the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia, prompting predictions of a new wave.

Meanwhile, protests in the wake of the death of George Floyd have spread across the country and around the world in places like France, Sweden, Spain, Switzerland, Italy, Australia and the UK. In Seattle protesters have barricaded a 6 to 9 block area of the city declaring it an “autonomous zone” free of any government authority or power. It makes one wonder how the principle in Romans 13:1-4 may be applied to such attempts at anarchy.

Journalist Chris Wallace published *Countdown 1945* recently about the Manhattan Project and the development of the first atomic bombs. In an interview about the book he remarked that there was a unity in the nation in 1945 that caused thousands of people to work on aspects of the project without leaking any details. He very perceptively opined this could never happen today because the country lacks that unity. The US is deeply divided, but it is only one more puzzle piece in a deeply embittered and divided world.

In the midst of all this turmoil Church of God congregations are working to resume in-person Sabbath services in accord with local regulations and requirements. Having been separated for so many weeks, it feels so good to be back together again!

However, there is a very real danger that we could bring into our congregations the suspicion, anger and division that has completely infected the world around us. The Church Administration and the Ministerial Board of Directors wrote us all this week to warn against the dangers of getting involved in the very political and vocal maelstrom roaring around us.

I would also like to address this general topic, but from a little different angle. I want to share the Parable of the Porcupine, perhaps you’ve heard a version of it before. I can’t nail down an author, it seems to have simply emerged at some point from the foggy world of pithy stories. But it seems rather apropos today, and has several moral lessons to consider.

It was the coldest winter ever. The snow was so deep and the cold so brutal that many animals in the forest froze to death.

In an effort to survive, the porcupines decided to gather together. As they huddled together close to each other, they collectively were better protected from the elements, and their shared body heat worked to stave off the penetrating cold.

But with such close proximity, their sharp quills soon proved to become a problem. With the slightest movement of any individual, his neighbors were inadvertently pricked and stabbed. And before long the mutual needling went from uncomfortable to unbearable/ And so, after a short time they decided it was best to separate, and they scattered throughout the forest.

It was then quickly realized that lacking the protection of a group, the porcupines didn't fare so well. One by one they began to succumb to the numbing cold, dying frozen and alone.

They soon realized they would have to choose between solitary death, or the uncomfortable needling that sometimes happened in a group. Wisely they decided to return to the huddle, and they learned to live with the little wounds that sometimes came with a close relationship with their fellows. Standing together they supported one another, and were able as a group to survive the brutal winter. In time winter's grip released, and springtime brought relief and life to the forest once again. And the porcupine community flourished with the lessons learned.

What lessons can we draw from this simplistic story?

One would be that no matter what relationship we consider (marriage, family, congregation, church etc.) people are not perfect, so little wounds and hurts are inevitable. But God did not design or call us to be solitary individuals (as tempting as that might sometimes be!). Rather He called us to learn to support one another, and work cohesively together.

Understanding that people aren't perfect should remind us that we are imperfect too. Most wounds we either suffer or cause aren't done with malice or forethought – they just accidentally happen. And it is important that we grant the same level of tolerance and forgiveness to others that we wish to have for ourselves.

And finally, it seems a little needling will ultimately be good for us. To spiritually survive and fulfill our calling we can't help but grow in compassion, trust and understanding. No matter how different we may be in various thoughts and perspectives, we are ultimately united behind the greatest cause led by the greatest Being in the universe!

The fires continue to burn and grow in the world around us, and nothing short of the return of Jesus Christ will put them out. However, you and I must learn to be different and live above the fray. We have been called to learn to be different (II Corinthians 6:17; Revelation 18:4; Acts 2:40). Don't let the divisions in the world cause divisions among us.

Tomorrow my family and I will be in Van Buren for morning services, and then travel down to Mena for afternoon services. I hope to see many of you there, and wish you all a joyous and profitable Sabbath.

Best regards,

Thomas L. Clark
Pastor