By now, we have repeatedly heard the recommendations as we navigate life in the age of the Coronavirus. Hopefully, all of us are doing our best to remember and obey the rules. Wash your hands with soap and water. If you are sick or have been exposed to someone who is, stay home. If you meet the criteria for a vulnerable population, be extra cautious about being in groups of people. Avoid physical contact. Practice “social distancing.” While perhaps the term is not new, it has taken on a life of its own, and I would scarcely be surprised if the people at Webster’s select “social distancing” as the Phrase of 2020.

From what I understand, social distancing means keeping about 6 feet from each other. If we consider the space, social distancing is quite literally keeping someone “at arms’ length.” Somewhere, my former coworkers at the school must be thinking, “Now here is a term tailor made for Tim!”

One year, at the department meeting before Christmas, the director’s administrative assistant thought the perfect gift for all of us stressed social workers would be a neck and shoulder massage.
As she made her way around the table, my friend Greg and our intern locked eyes with me as if to scream, “Tim, what are you going to do?!” Eventually, she made it to me. “Oh, uh, no thank you.” “Oh, come on, now-“ “No, I’m good, thanks.” “No, I can tell you’re all tense-“ And just as she was about to make contact, I held up my hand and said, “If you’re not married to me, don’t touch me!” And, thus, my reputation as the most uptight guy in the building was secure...

Today’s passage from John provides us much to consider when it comes to boundaries and personal space.

The object of scorn by the Pharisees establishment, Jesus heads toward Galilee. He did not HAVE to go through Samaria; more accurate would be to say it behooved Him to do so. In other words, the route into Samaritan territory was meant to be to fulfill God’s purposes.

No one would have expected Jesus to engage in talking with the woman at the well. Time and culture had well established rules to expect plenty of social distancing between them.
A major reason for the enmity between Samaritans of the North and Jews of the South was, as our verses hint, around where to worship. Samaritans believed Mount Gerizim was the place; Jews, of course, were drawn to Jerusalem. Apparently, a high priest had even at one point gone so far as to burn down the Samaritan Temple at Gerizim.

Another factor was that due to Samaritans’ intermingling with the Assyrians, the Jews considered their northern neighbors to be inferior, a “mixed race” whose legitimacy as believers was somehow tainted, or “less than.” This was not a pretty relationship but one of distrust, animosity, and some aggression.

As if that were not enough, the notion of a man and woman speaking to one another in a public place, even if they were both Samaritans or both Jews, was unthinkable!

Despite all the reasons social distancing would have been deemed entirely appropriate, Jesus initiates communication. He speaks to her, asking for water on a dry, hot day. Jesus shows us social proximity is possible, even in the context that would expect disdain, animosity, and distance.
Notice how she responds. We may know she is talking to Jesus – our Jesus! – but she has no reason to know who he is or the wondrous things He’s done. As far as she can tell, he is merely some dusty, thirsty Jew who, by all accounts, has no right or reason to talk to her.

Despite all the reasons there “should” be social distance, we do not find it happening here. In its place, Jesus shifts the topic from liquid water that might quench a temporary thirst to the eternal water that knowing Him brings, changing everything!

In the unexpected plot twist, Jesus asks about her relationship history. We may be tempted to interpret this as his exposing sin or shaming her into being further socially distanced. Such is not the case: nowhere in this passage do we hear Jesus identifying her as sinful. In her time and place, it is safe to assume she had no say in any of those marriages. Entering into the first one was likely arranged by the parents. Any divorce would have been initiated by the husband, and being a widow would have placed her in line to be married to a husband’s brother.

Jesus does not have her history revealed to embarrass her but rather to make clear who He is: the all-knowing Messiah! For John, sin is not so much about behavior as it is about unbelief. She comes to believe in Jesus upon realizing he knows all.
Having overcome all reasons for social distancing – gender, religion, social norms, behavior – Jesus gives the time and patience that defies all convention to communicate she matters to him, despite whatever the world may have to say about it.

And with that, the distancing between them about where to worship becomes irrelevant. Choosing between Jerusalem and Mount Gerizom is no longer the issue: Jesus is the place to worship.

Unlike the other Gospels, where Jesus insists his fellow Jewish people keep quiet about who he is, here Jesus says, “I AM,” the language by which God self-identified in the Hebrew Testament, and he makes no obstacle to her telling her neighbors. It is safe that a foreigner knows; she does not tie his status to nationalist, revolutionary hopes that would derail his ministry. Off she runs, and her neighbors come flocking back.

Having missed everything, the disciples come back from grocery shopping. With armfuls of overpriced hand sanitizer, produce, and bread, they are aghast that he had been talking to not only a Samaritan, but, worse, a woman!
How could Jesus not be hungry? Reminiscent of defending himself against the tempter in the wilderness, Jesus explains his real hunger is to do the will of God. That satisfies Him more than anything they would have found at the local deli!

Overcoming all that would serve to divide them, social proximity rules the day. The testimony of the woman at the well, whose name her community may have known but we do not, many came to believe. For her, for them, for us, the truth becomes clear: Jesus knows. Jesus loves.

He did not judge her. He did not denigrate her or her culture. We have no indication he shook anyone’s hand, or even that he ever did get that drink from the well.

Yes, Jesus knows everything she has ever done, and loves her.
Yes, Jesus knows all about the Samaritans, and loves them.
Yes, Jesus knows all about us, and loves us...anyway.

As we navigate the uncertainty and anxiety of our circumstances, know that we, too, can be inspired by Jesus. Even as we practice precautions, know that acting with respect, love, and compassion keeps us, too, in social proximity.