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INTERVIEW

Overcoming the Panes of Loneliness

A pastor identifies three pieces of glass that isolate us from our neighbors and communities.

INTERVIEW BY ASHLEY HALES / POSTED MAY 11, 2020



Image: Oliver Rossi / Getty Images

Glass has many uses, most of them morally neutral. It helps us let in sunlight, our reflections, and sip our beverages, among other commonplace conveniences. It has also enabled a series of social and technological revolutions that fuel increasing isolation from our neighbors and physical surroundings. Eric Jacobsen, senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Washington, takes stock of these transformations in *Three Pieces of Glass: Why We Feel Isolated and Mediated by Screens*. Writer Ashley Hales, author of *Finding Holy in the Suburbs*, speaks about regaining a sense of place and rebuilding habits of embodied interaction—even during

Can you describe the three “pieces of glass” and how they have contributed to i and places?

Let me start with what I would have said *before* the onset of the pandemic.

I think we’re all fairly aware of the way that smartphones have changed our social in to look at our screens rather than each other’s faces. What I’m trying to do with this back to a couple earlier cultural developments that encouraged screen-mediated int face interaction.

The first of these occurred around 70 years ago, not with the invention of the autom culture and an infrastructure in which you really needed to have an automobile to g treat each other differently when we’re driving our cars. You see another driver not a competitor. So the car windshield is the first piece of glass.

This led fairly quickly to the second piece of glass—the television screen—because w around driving everywhere, there were certain practices that went into decline. We around our neighborhoods and talk with our neighbors. And those neighbors weren’t often, ready to talk, because more homes were oriented toward the back rather than

And so instead of interacting with our neighbors, we moved indoors and started wat there, we started developing something akin to “relationships” with TV characters, a corrosive effect on our souls. We would get our emotions wound up and drawn in by though we didn’t enjoy real relationships with them. It can be voyeuristic. In some w for human connection, but it also diminishes our impulse to go out and talk to actual

The car and the television dealt a one-two punch to our ability and our impulse to co Now, there were gaps in this system. You’d still drive to the grocery store and end up line. Or you’d go pick up your kids from school and talk to the parents.

The effect of the smartphone—the third piece of glass—was to combine the worst ele pieces of glass. We’re really mean to each other on our phones. And we can also beha look at heartbreaking and heartwarming stories around the globe, and we ignore the standing two feet in front of us. I want to suggest some ways we might recover the de

contact.

Screens can certainly isolate us. But in the current context of our quarantined interaction is often the only option. How can we use screens for connection du

As my own congregation has shifted into livestreaming services, I've been sort of im: We've been surprised at our ability to make connections even in that disembodied w offered an important means of connection. During our livestream, we've changed ou text message. I'll say, "I want you to text someone from our church, 'The peace of the

So the phone can absolutely be a tool for good. But it really does depend on how I'm u to call elderly members of my church and ask how they're doing, that's reaching out But it's just as possible, of course, that I'll pick up my phone and swipe left to the nev call. This has the tendency of furthering self-isolation; I become wrapped up in a ser falling apart.

Our phones can be used in so many ways. As Christians, we need to be more nuanced purposes—and more aware of the values and characteristics God is trying to build in

You write about the difference between *space* and *place*. How does the Bible hel distinction?

When we make a space our own, it becomes a place. The best picture of that is a dorn in. There's a bed and a dresser. There's a desk and blank walls. Nothing's happened t

But a student living there for a couple of months quickly makes it a place. You put a p on the desk. You buy a lamp at Target. You put posters up on the walls. You put up a r something. You've made it a place by inscribing it with your stories. Place is really in formation as humans. It's important to a sense of flourishing—you can't live in a hot

Banishment from place has always been a consequence of the curse of sin. When Ad: banished from the Garden of Eden. When Cain kills Abel, he's sent away. The goal of a particular place: the New Jerusalem, where Christ will reign.

This doesn't mean God can't use mere spaces. The wilderness is a kind of space. The wilderness, as did John the Baptist and even Jesus himself. These spaces can be used to speak to us and cleanse our wayward hearts. Right now, as we're enduring a period of hope we can receive it as something of a wilderness moment, where we commune with God. Yet we're always being called back to place.

One of the things we need most right now is to recover a sense of place. How do we connect and build strong relationships? Most of us are aware of loneliness being a problem in our lives, not simply relational loneliness that leaves us feeling alienated. It's displacement as we can do from your home, even in the midst of a pandemic: order groceries, watch everything all very convenient. But it does lead to a sense of feeling disconnected from the broader world, which only feeds into loneliness.

How do you see an era of social distancing shaping our understanding of place as a new category?

With everyone taking something of a break from "place" right now, I'm giving myself a lot of thought about synchronizing time, which is another important factor right now. I'm a big advocate of being in the same place. But right now, I'm really trying to encourage people to at least try an online time—even when they have the option of watching a recording later.

I would hope that if we can do this successfully, the longer-term outcome would be a church in a particular place. We really want to focus on the gathered experience of worship on Sunday morning. But the reality of our culture is that other things compete for that attention: soccer games on Sunday mornings. There are families traveling. There are shut-ins and even without the coronavirus. I hope that the idea of synchronizing our time can persist so that even if you're physically away from the Sunday morning gathering, you still participate in the livestream as it happens.

I don't believe that virtual relationships are ultimately satisfying. But if a virtual relationship is a real, embodied relationship, then virtual connection can enhance the relationship rather than replace it. I hope that when we get back to really being a place-based, embodied congregation, so that we've had being apart will enrich us.

Looking forward to a time after the pandemic subsides, what steps can we take to address the damage that screen-centered living has done to our relationships with neighbors and our place?

If we can get through this pandemic and all its restrictions, I think it might remind us to value our face-to-face connection with one another—and how that's not fully replaceable connection.

When things return to normal, or some semblance of normal, one of my hopes is that we'll rebuild our lives more carefully and avoid just filling them with junk and distraction that we appreciated some aspects of the slower pace and realize we want to preserve. We've unmasked so many of our idols—so many things we've leaned on for our comfort, for our identity. When idols get stripped away, it really leaves us asking what else there is to stand on. Have we built a foundation?

One defining feature of our modern culture is that it's allowed us to access different experiences from faraway places. I would hope that we'll rebuild our lives, to a great extent, that take place on a more local basis. And I hope that Christians will try to connect not only with other Christians but also with other folks who live nearby, so that together they might create a new culture.

Thinking about our means of transportation is a really important part of this. Our culture is all about driving everywhere. And for a lot of people, that really is the only option. But walking, when possible, is a great way to stay grounded in the particular features—geographic and cultural—of where we live. It isn't just for exercise.

I have the luxury of living only about three-quarters of a mile from my workplace, so I commute primarily by bike. And my experience of commuting is so different from people who drive. For instance, of little hills along this stretch that are easy for drivers to overlook. I notice these hills in different ways because I can see the buds on the trees and smell the flowers blooming. I think that getting from place to place can really help anchor us to our communities.