

OPINION

Love, generosity and compassion will help us get through the coronavirus crisis

Becca Stevens, Guest Columnist — Tennessean, March 22, 2020

Rev. Becca Stevens, founder and president of Thistle Farms, spoke to students at Lipscomb University in Nashville. The Tennessean

As the reality of the coronavirus is beginning to sink more deeply into our minds, we held a staff meeting for the chapel I serve in Nashville, Tennessee.

The pastoral team suggested we call to check on all the folks who are health compromised, elderly or financially strapped. Something in that response didn't feel complete. First, I knew most of the people would go instinctually into "southern polite": "I'm fine, but aren't you sweet for checking in."

Meanwhile, I am imagining them awake at 2:30 in the morning with anxiety over simple supplies and hand sanitizer. One of the gifts of this time is the woods are not closed for business, and I could walk daily figuring out how to spend my "corona" sabbatical.

All of us are doing the same thing. We think globally; then plan on a personal level. We collectively start the internal list of our plan for gathering supplies and distributing them to ourselves, our family, and maybe a friend.

We decide how we are going to spend our gift of time and not be the one to gain the “corona 20.”

How the 'Front Porch Pantry was formed

As I walked in the woods and thought about a strategy for going to the store, my mind went back to the conversation I had on the phone with the pastoral team. That’s it. I want to help people buy supplies for other people who are facing challenges.

Within 24 hours we launched “Front Porch Pantry,” a simple temporary program for people to drop off food on my porch. My sons then take the supplies and deliver them on the front porches of people who need them.



Rev. Becca Stevens, founder of Nashville women's healing center Thistle Farms, with her 2017 book *Love Heals* (Photo: Submitted)

Each bag contains, hand sanitizer, toilet paper, and maybe small communion wafers to use during our virtual services in a communal meal. My oldest son Levi hosted an Instagram live concert announcing the project hoping his fans would donate a few bucks since most of them aren't in Nashville.

The staff at the chapel loved the idea and bought items online in bulk. Thistle farms, a community of women survivors put it online to serve all the graduates and residents of their programs.

Within 48 hours we started delivering our first boxes of toiletries and goodies. The emails from the first recipients were -- "I love this community,"

"You have no idea what this means to me to be remembered," "How did you know I was running low?" and, of course, "You shouldn't have, but I am so so thankful."

People started dropping off amazing things, offerings of love in trying times. Never once was anyone within six feet of another person. But love travels farther than 6 feet and you can feel it. It was a gift to our family as well.

Packing a box with a roll of toilet paper, when you are down to your last eight rolls, is a spiritual exercise, a tithe. If you want world peace, maybe start with sharing a roll of toilet paper.

'How could I live on 5 sheets of toilet paper a day?'

Two weeks ago, as the coronavirus was unfolding, I was sitting in an asylum-seeker camp on the border in Matamoros, Mexico. About 3,000 people are in a tent city on a dirt strip between the Rio Grande and the Brownsville border.

People stand in line to eat, to charge phones, and to go to the bathroom in a line of porta potties that stretch the length of a basketball court. There is a stand in what would be center court with a woman as referee.

To each person she passes out five squares of toilet paper, pre-torn and folded. I thought about the huge scale of problems between governments and borders, and the reality of people who just need toilet paper. Of all the

degradations I saw that week that one stuck with me. How could I live on 5 sheets of toilet paper a day?

One afternoon I was beading with kids in the camp, listening to them laugh and tell stories with a resiliency we all should hope to embody in our lives. There was a strong smell of feces that rose as the wind shifted. I swear to you I thought it but the incense of this camp. That smell that rises like a prayer of petition.

When some poor soul can't wait in line to receive their 5 sheets, they must go down by the river to squat and wipe with thin long grasses. The smell was humility and longing: two things close to God's heart. Unlike every other time in my life, I didn't cover my nose or make a face. I just made myself breathe, like all the kids.

I don't want to turn away from the smell of humanity or the reality of the struggle of families trying to find a home with their own damn bathroom.

'I am with you' is the best answer to 'How long will this last?'

That evening we received a message that none of the six of us from Thistle Farms could come back to the camp. We had all flown and the risk of our infecting the camp was too great.

For a minute I forgot that I can be infectious and smelly and needy. I am sorry for thinking I was being gallant in my response to the stench in the camp. Some of that smell comes from me. My prayer as I flew home was to keep low enough to the ground, not to forget the smells that rise from all of us

When I got home, I had missed the big runs on toilet paper. I thought people sure could have used a referee like the saint who handed out sheets. If everyone had bought just one roll at a time, we still would have still been toilet paper rich by camp standards.

So when I say offering a roll of toilet paper to someone as a spiritual discipline, I mean it. It is holy and good. Practically divine.

How long will this last? How long do we need to share toilet paper? The answer throughout time by love is simply "I am with you."

While that doesn't seem like enough of an answer, it is more sufficient than we can imagine. I am with you in your big and small sufferings. I am with you in your secret daily fears and in your dreams. I will keep being with you, for however long it takes.

Peace and love.