

August 7, 2020

Blessings, Everyone!

Update

- Our church building is still officially closed. We have not ceased to be the church, but we are not meeting as the gathered church for Sunday worship, Sunday morning Bible study, and Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group. Our boards and committees are meeting informally through email, so our church is functioning, is surviving financially thanks to all of you, and we are trying to discern what our next step will be and when it will take place.

I am constantly reviewing guidelines sent out by the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ and am trying to get a feel for what is happening in churches that have reopened in our area and around the country. The horror stories stand out, e.g., 46 out of 90 parishioners came down with COVID-19 following a revival meeting. I'm sure that other churches are reengaging in safe ways on a limited basis and are doing fine. The members of the Diaconate and I are keeping abreast of guidelines issued by Governor Baker.

The Diaconate and I will be meeting tomorrow morning, and we will continue to meet monthly to discuss what our next steps will be. As part of the process, we will find a way to ask you what you would like us to do and how safe you would feel if we were to resume Sunday morning worship with social distancing, masks, etc. We are interested in learning how many of you would actually attend Sunday worship. I assume coffee hour and study groups will be off the table for some time. Think about it and let us know your thoughts.

I am also considering resuming our study group meetings using Zoom teleconferencing. We could offer a Bible study, the resumption of our Spiritual Exploration Reading Group, and perhaps even begin a reading group on Jungian psychology. I have no idea whether you would be interested in any of all of these, how often in a given month you would like to "meet," what days of the week and times of day would be best for you, and whether you would need help to feel comfortable with the Zoom platform (it is so easy that even I have been able to use it). Think about it. If you have any thoughts, please let me know.

Let's continue to be the church—to pray for each other, for our country, and for the world in this time of trial. Let us also raise up our prayers for Cheryl Holmes, who recently lost her mother. Cheryl, our thoughts and prayers are with you.

The Pastor's Reflections

You'd think I would be happy. When I checked the sports page this morning, the Yankees were in first place in the American League East with an 8-1 record, and the Red Sox were in last place with a record of 3-8. The Sox starters have a 7.07 ERA; the team has allowed 17 homers (the most in baseball); and, despite a solid contribution both at bat and in the field from Xander Bogaerts, they can't manage to outscore their opponents. Not to worry, however; I suspect that Bogaerts will be traded away sometime soon "for the good of the team." As I recall, the Sox have a history of doing this going back to 1920. (Where is Lee Cummings when I want to tease him??)

In addition, the Patriots have picked up Cam Newton to help fill the gap left by the dearly departed Tom Brady. Cam, a seasoned veteran, is undoubtedly a superior athlete and will give Jarrett Stidham a run for his money as the #1 quarterback. I never liked Cam Newton. I thought he was an arrogant jerk. I felt this way until the Patriots picked him up. Now, suddenly, I have discovered that I like him!

I know I should be happy, but I'm not. The artificially shortened Red Sox, Bruins, and Celtics seasons hold little interest for me. I scan the sports section every morning, but I read the section about the pandemic in our state, in our country, and around the world word-for-word. I want to know what's going on. I need to know what's going on. But the numbers are depressing. What's even worse, people (or at least the way they are thinking, feeling, and behaving) are depressing. I am discouraged by what I read and what I see.

BTW, reading the "numbers tally" every morning: the number of new cases of COVID-19, the number of total cases, the number of new deaths, and the total number of deaths, I had a flashback. Way back in the 1960's, we were involved in a "conflict" that I regarded as a dubious undertaking. Actually, that is understated; I was against the war. It was the first time that some of us became aware that our government, our *own government* could lie to us. (It probably had before, but we didn't know it, and we found it difficult to believe.) I remember how every evening during the eleven o'clock news, the Associated Press (or somebody) posted the number of casualties that had occurred that day. When 300 North Vietnamese or Vietcong had been killed by our troops and only 75 American soldiers had died in battle that particular day, I celebrated. I felt good. It was a good day. We were showing ourselves to be a superior fighting power. The numbers proved it.

At the time, I never thought of those numbers (on both sides) as people, as persons, as someone's mother/father/son/daughter/husband/wife/friend. They were just numbers. I am not sure if this was an indicator of my immaturity, of my lack of empathy, of my failure to grasp the Great Interconnectedness of all people, of all sentient beings, or if this was intentional, if someone was trying to convince us that the whole thing was just a matter of numbers, just like the final result of a baseball game. I believe it was not until 1983 or 1984 when I visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., when I looked over the 57,939 names on the Wall (a number that was

later revised upward to 58,318), that it struck me and I burst into tears. These were not numbers to be celebrated; these were people to be mourned. I need to remember this when I “celebrate” that only eighteen Massachusetts residents died from the coronavirus yesterday, when I take pride in the belief that, in Massachusetts, “our numbers are good.”

I am using the Zoom platform for video-conferencing, for doing telehealth or teletherapy sessions with my clients, my counselees, throughout the week. It is better than not meeting at all; it is better than talking on the phone; but it is not the same as being together in person. As one of my clients said, seeing each other on a computer screen is two-dimensional. We are together, but we are not together. I find it emotionally draining. I have had to cut back on my hours and keep to a strict spacing to make it through the day, and even then, I am exhausted every evening. I suspect that, in addition to my own coronavirus fatigue, my clients and I are picking up a layer of energy that emanates from the collective--a layer of depression, anxiety, confusion, fear, impatience, and anger. In addition to the “layers” that each of us has, layers from our childhood, from our inner complexes and struggles, from our own difficult life situations in the present, we are also soaking up a fairly large layer from the collective. This weighs us down. Many of us report “feeling heavy.”

Most of my clients, in addition to feeling frustrated, tired, and limited by the pandemic restrictions, are angry at the virus, angry at the way our federal government has handled this public health crisis, and angry at the extent to which this crisis has become politicized. Even more than this, many of us are deeply disappointed in the thinking, feeling, and behavior that is openly expressed by so many of our fellow Americans and people around the world. In addition to the depressing number of people who are pushing back against the Black Lives Matter movement, who are determined to cling to their racism and their sense of white superiority, I am deeply disappointed and discouraged at the large number of science deniers, of people who feel no sense of social responsibility, of people who are only concerned with themselves and their “freedom,” who expose the lie that undercuts our naïve declaration that “we are all in this together.” I am thinking of the two men in Paris who dragged their cab driver out of his cab and beat him to death because he asked them to wear masks while they were riding in his cab out of respect for the next passengers. I am thinking of the man in Wisconsin who, when a cashier in a grocery store asked him to wear a mask if not for his own health then for the cashier’s health, replied, “I don’t give a s__t about your health!”

One of the books I have read during my pandemic retreat is Edward O. Wilson’s *The Meaning of Human Existence*. It is a masterpiece. E. O. Wilson is an unabashed atheist. He sees no need for a god or any supernatural being to explain how we got here and our meaning in life. I would point out, however, that he does not disprove the “existence” or the reality of a god or the spiritual dimension of life; he only shows that

we can get along scientifically without it. I agree, but this is not my experience and not the way I want to live my life.

E. O. Wilson, who is wicked smart, does make an interesting point. To summarize (inadequately), he talks about how we evolved genetically. He tells us that we human beings as a species, just like all animals, are programmed to survive and evolve. We want what is best for us as individuals, a trait that is called individual-level selection. However, over time we developed what is called group-level selection. This genetically shaped and genetically driven force promoted altruism and cooperation among all the group members. It gave rise to group-wide morality and a sense of conscience and honor. During a crisis period, these two forces can function in an oppositional manner or can come into a state of creative tension with each other. Wilson tells us,

Within groups, selfish individuals beat altruistic individuals, but groups of altruists beat groups of selfish individuals. Or, risking oversimplification, individual selection promoted sin, while group selection promoted virtue.

This means that when we “look out for Number One,” when we behave in a selfish or self-centered manner, it may increase our individual chance of survival within the group, but it does so by undermining the interests, the health, the well-being of the larger society. When we think of others, when we have empathy for others, when we reach out to others, when we build bridges to others, we greatly increase the chances of survival not only for the larger society, but also for ourselves—because we are part of the larger group.

This means that Black lives and Brown lives should matter to us white people, that the fate of elderly persons in nursing homes or veterans in veterans homes should matter, that immigrant families and people in our own country who have no health insurance because they suddenly find themselves unemployed should matter, that immigrant families fleeing gang-dominated violence in their country of origin should matter, that people in Africa and India and people in countries with totally dysfunctional political and social systems that are just beginning to be ravaged by this deadly virus should matter, that the economy of not only our country but the world economy should matter very much to us. If we look out for ourselves alone, we may survive in the short term, but in the long term we will perish—along with everyone else.

I wish Jesus had said something like this in non-scientific terms, in words that we call could understand—perhaps in parables. Wait a minute . . . ! I think he did!

Let me tell you a little Zen parable. It is one of my favorite parables. I get teary every single time I read it. No one knows who first said it or wrote it, but according to Zen Master Kosho Uchiyama in *Opening the Hand of Thought*, it appears to have

emerged sometime during the Edo period in Japan (1600-1868). The parable goes like this:

Behind the temple of a large Zen monastery, there was a field where there were many squashes growing on a vine. One day the squashes got into a heated argument about something, a fight broke out among them, and the squashes split up into two groups that made a big racket shouting at and threatening each other.

The head priest of the temple heard the uproar and, going out to see what was going on, found the squashes quarreling among themselves. In a loud booming voice, the priest scolded them. "Hey, squashes! What are you doing out there fighting? Everyone sit zazen—right now!"

The priest taught them how to do zazen. "Fold your legs like this, with your right foot on your left thigh and your left foot on your right thigh; sit up; straighten your back and neck; half close your eyes and focus on a spot on the ground about six feet from where you are sitting. Watch your breathing with even-hovering attention to the point where you no longer realize that "you" are breathing, where you become just a swinging gate through which breath passes between the inner world and the outer world, where "you" no longer exist." When the squashes sat zazen in the way the priest had taught them, they discovered that their anger subsided, and they began to feel a sense of inner peace and well-being.

Then the priest quietly said, "Everyone put your hand on top of your head." When the squashes did this, when they felt the top of their heads, they found some strange thing attached there. It turned out to be the vine that connected them all together and that gave them life. "This is really strange," said the squashes. "Here we've been arguing and fighting with each other when we're actually all tied together and living just one life. What a mistake! It's just as the priest has told us."

After that, the squashes all got along with each other quite well.

I wish Jesus had something like that. Wait a minute . . .! I think he did! I think he told us, "I am the vine and you are the branches." I think he told us, "Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me."

I hope we can prove ourselves advanced evolutionary beings in the terms that E. O. Wilson shared with us. Then, as Jesus taught us, we will realize that we are all in this together.

Be well. Stay safe. Be patient. Be disciplined. Think of others. Keep the faith. Don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul