

August 16, 2020

Blessings, Everyone!

I came to a realization this past week. When our church discontinued our gatherings in the middle of March, I quickly came to several conclusions. First, I was not convinced that our members would avail themselves of an on-line worship service every Sunday, nor was I convinced that I had the expertise to pull one off. Second, I am not the kind of pastor to hold worship services in our (little) parking lot from the back of a pickup truck (wrong part of the country). Third, since I was just learning about the possibility of holding meetings over the Zoom platform, I was not convinced that I could effectively lead a study group by this method, nor was I convinced that it would be even close to the same experience that we have when we meet in person. Fourth, I had no idea how long this pandemic, with its accompanying restrictions, would last. I thought (hoped) that it would be just a few months.

I decided that I would continue to write a sermon every week while we were sheltering in place and post it on the web site. However, I am not convinced that many of our members turn to the web site to read my sermons, which is why I have tried to attach them to my Keeping in (Virtual) Touch communications. I have yet to master the art of audio recording them and having David Crane post the audio version on the web site. (I think I have a block here.) I also decided, unilaterally (which is not always the best way to make decisions), that people were hearing all they wanted and needed to hear about the pandemic, and that I would write sermons that had nothing to do with what we were going through—kind of a counter to the blitz of information we receive about the coronavirus every day.

In retrospect, this was not a good idea. First, the “regular” sermons became more and more difficult to write, a writing/preaching block that I have not experienced in the twenty-two years that I have served as pastor of this church. Second, I found that everything I was reading had a profound connection to what we are all going through with this pandemic, and I wanted to share what I was learning. Third, I became increasingly aware of the depth of pain and the difficult struggles that so many of our parishioners and my counselees are experiencing as this “new normal” becomes increasingly entrenched in our lives. Think of the deaths of members and friends of our church family, the inability of their loved ones to be with them during the last few months of their life and at the time of their passing. Think of our inability to grieve and to celebrate their life with a memorial service and collation in the church that they loved. Think of our inability to worship together and to experience the fellowship that is such a central part of our church experience. Think of church members and friends who are living alone, who now feel really alone, really isolated. Think of families (like mine) that can’t celebrate birthdays and holidays, that can’t visit each other, that can’t touch or hug or babysit. Think of people who are anxious, afraid, depressed, sad, lonely, irritated, and angry.

How could I have thought that I could write a sermon every week that did not address what we are all going through? I couldn’t. And so, I have come to a conclusion. This pandemic is an existential crisis. It is something that affects us all very deeply. It raises issues of life and death, issues of caring, empathy, and compassion, issues of hope and despair, issues of meaning in life. It provides us with a lens through which we can view the world and our own country, the ways in which this pandemic has separated us and

the ways in which it has drawn us closer together. It can teach us a lot about not only our brothers and sisters and about life, but also about ourselves. We need to look at this existential crisis through the eyes of faith, through the lens of our Christian tradition and other spiritual traditions as well as through the lens of science, philosophy, psychology, sociology, myth, and literature. If we can do this, it may help us not only weather the storm, but actually grow and deepen through the process. The other alternative, the alternative of regression into self-interest, will only lead to depression, anger, and ever-increasing fear.

Every week I will be sending out this Keeping in (Virtual) Touch missive to the members and friends of our church family who are on my constantly expanding contact list. The list includes anyone and everyone who has expressed an interest in our church or in my reflections on what we are going through. The first part of this missive will be a very short newsletter; it will keep you in touch with what is going on in our church. The second part will be my reflections on what we are experiencing as seen through the perspectives of our Christian faith and the various readings that have been enriching my understanding and my perspective over the past few months. This will take the place of the “regular” sermons, which I found I really couldn’t do.

Let’s try this and see how it works. Of course, I welcome feedback, and I thank all of you who have responded so positively and supportively to the past six Keeping in (Virtual) Touch communications. It is clear to most of us that this pandemic, with its accompanying restrictions, is going to be with us for an extended period. In the absence of the wonderful experience of gathering together for worship, fellowship, and study, we need something that holds us together, something that reminds us that even though we are not meeting as the gathered church, we are still the church. I hope this addresses at least some part of that need.

Keeping in Touch

We as a church have not yet come to a conclusion about when we will be able to resume gatherings. We are all in agreement that we will be guided by an abundance of caution. Some of us are skeptical that we can resume worship and meetings until next summer; we all hope that it can be before then. We are keeping abreast of the guidelines issued by Governor Baker, the Southeastern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ, and the experience of churches around the country and especially in our area. We will wait and see what happens as we move into the fall.

Thanks to the faithfulness of those who have pledged to the church and the generosity of our friends, we are holding our own financially. We are keeping our building and grounds in good shape, and it seems that we will be able to retain and pay our staff—the pastor, organist/music director, and sexton throughout this pandemic period. We also recently received a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan of a little over \$4,000 from the federal government, administered through St. Mary’s Credit Union in Marlborough, to assist us in retaining our staff. When the funds are exhausted, St. Mary’s will help us apply for loan forgiveness, which is all but assured. The loan (at 1% interest) will then be forgiven and become a grant. This may not sound like a lot of money, but for a little church like ours, this means a lot!

Please let me know if there are any newsworthy items that I can include in upcoming missives.

The Pastor's Reflections

I had a dream the other night. In the dream God came to me and said, "Paul, I don't understand what's happening. I gave the world a little virus, nothing big. All everyone had to do was stay at home for one month and watch television and the whole thing would die out. I, of course, had my preferences regarding what people should watch for movies: The Ten Commandments, The Last Temptation of Christ, and O God! are high on my list. I also like the recent television series God Friended Me. I don't want to be perceived as controlling (God forbid!), so I would be happy with anything they selected. But do you think they could do this? No! And just look at the mess that they made!"

OK. That's not exactly the way it happened. It wasn't really a dream—I got it from Facebook. Actually, I don't do Facebook (a source of perverse pride for me), but I am not above using postings that my wife or other people bring to my attention. I presented it as a dream in the hopes that you would think that God and I are on a first name basis. (Actually, I think we are.) But that's not the point. The point is that this little monologue contains a profound truth. It is not what enters our life, the challenges that we encounter in life, that are important; it's what we do with them, how we respond to them.

How are we responding to this pandemic and to the pandemic induced restrictions? Is it pulling us off center? Is it the coronavirus that is pulling us off center, or is it the way we are responding to it? Are we coming to realize that the stages of grief that were so helpfully articulated by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross so many years ago equally apply to our relationship to this pandemic? Are we in the stage of shock, denial, bargaining, depression, anger, resignation, or a true and healthy acceptance? I think a lot of us are still in various iterations of the stage of denial. I am thinking of the 400 college students who gathered together sans masks for a party the very first weekend they returned to school in Greenville, North Carolina, those young people who are living manifestations of David Elkind's concept of the personal fable, the false (and dangerous) belief that "it can never happen to me," or whose education concerning the coronavirus and the concept of social responsibility are significantly deficient. In addition to moronic denial, many of us, too many of us, however, appear to be stuck in the stage of anger.

I recently received a brochure entitled Emerge: Blessings and Rituals for Unsheltering that was sent, free of charge, to United Church of Christ clergy. It is a collection of reflections and prayers composed by members of a group called the Still Speaking Writers' Group. The following prayer caught my attention.

Dear God,
I'm pissed off.
The bills were already late.
The collectors were already calling.
The shifts were already too long.
The shifts already disappeared.
The appointments were already postponed.
The house already needed work.
The family already needed new clothes.
The food was already too expensive.

It was already exhausting just to live.

And now this.
Now the hoarding and the panic
from those who perform scarcity
because they've never actually known it.

Now the discarding of my life
because the health care
I already couldn't afford
is now even more beyond my reach.

Now, in a downturned economy,
companies get bailouts
yet I can't get enough help.
Where do I place this anger?

Where are you, God, in this moment?
I am pissed,
and I'm tired of asking "How long, O Lord?"
Can you just answer the question?

The writer added the following note: "I encourage reading this prayer and if possible, finding a safe space to scream. Rinse and repeat. God can take it."

I get it. I understand the anger. Throughout this pandemic I have become increasingly aware of how privileged I am, of what a privileged lifestyle I enjoy. I experience a relatively low level of suffering, deprivation, and hardship. I can keep my house and my job, and I have excellent health insurance. I have plenty to eat. I know that many, many people in our country and around the world are suffering much more than I. And I understand that anger, that outrage needs to be validated, needs to be honored.

And yet, I wonder if this writer and so many of us, are stuck in the anger stage of grief. I wonder if railing against God for visiting this plague on us is the best, the healthiest response to what we as individuals and as a world are going through. I wonder if the enemy is "out there" in God and/or the coronavirus, or if it is within us. I wonder whether it is not the virus but the way we have responded to the virus, the ways that we have helped to spread it, to empower it. I wonder whether instead of looking to God for deliverance, we should look to ourselves. I wonder if we need an exorcism of the virus, or if we need an exorcism of an attitude or a stance toward life within ourselves.

I understand and accept this woman's anger. I'm sure God understands and accepts it as well. She is obviously and justifiably "pissed off." It's just that I see and experience so much anger out there. Ensnared and somewhat hidden in the layers of anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and depression that so many of us experience, layers that are part of the collective, that constitute more than the sum of the individual layers, is a very large layer of anger. It spills out. We are acting it out. The number of random shootings and senseless murders are up in Boston, Chicago, and many other cities. Reports of domestic violence are up. Staff in grocery stores have been verbally and physically

assaulted for suggesting that customers abide by the posted rule to wear masks and socially distance. On a recent visit to Lowe's (to replace a broken aerator in a bathroom faucet), I witnessed people who were not wearing masks. To be sure, these people were in the minority; most people were whole-heartedly or begrudgingly compliant. But I had the feeling that some of these individuals who were taking a stand on their freedom to be socially irresponsible were itching for a fight. My wife and my daughter have told me very strongly that I am not to confront these individuals with their noncompliance and certainly not to refer to them out loud as "maskholes." So, I don't. I am aware that some of them have guns, and my karate skills have waned through the years. I have to watch, to monitor my anger as well.

Many years ago, Sigmund Freud talked about what he called "free-floating anxiety." We now call this Generalized Anxiety Disorder. The individual experiences a fairly constant level or layer of anxiety that hovers and then attaches to various aspects of his/her life. I think that in addition to this, we are now witnessing an increased level or layer of free-floating anger. There is evidence of this in the riots that so often accompany (but which are not to be confused with) the non-violent protests against racism and police brutality. I find myself disturbed, disgusted, and dismayed by the looting, the wanton destruction of stores, the violent attacks against police officers who have, admittedly, too often been part of the problem rather than part of the solution, who have instigated the physical confrontations rather than defusing them. I can understand the free-floating anger that so many people experience. I still don't think it is the healthiest and the most productive response to what we are going through. And I am unable to condone the way that it is being acted out.

When I was down in Selma preparing to participate in the March to Montgomery, we had daily training sessions in nonviolence. The organizers of the March made it clear to us that unless we were willing to commit to a nonviolent stance, even in response to attacks by police or those residents of Selma who were less than thrilled by our presence there, we should go home. Just one instance of striking back and causing the death of a police officer or a civilian would go through the southern newspapers like wildfire and would undermine the movement. They told us that if a Selma police officer or an Alabama state trooper were to beat us with his nightstick, we were to drop to our knees and curl up in a ball with our arms protecting our head. We were told that it would take a very powerful strike to break our back, to shatter our vertebrae, but our skull was much more vulnerable. If we were unwilling or unable to commit to this, we should go home immediately. To this day, I am still not sure why I decided to stay. But I did.

They also talked to us about Mahatma Gandhi, about Martin Luther King, Jr., and about Jesus. A commitment to nonviolence goes much deeper than a tactic in the movement. It is a way of thinking. It is a way of life.

As God pointed out to me in my dream, the coronavirus is not the problem. It is not the enemy. It simply is what it is. The damage that has been done is because of the way we have responded to it, the less than enlightened way that we have responded to it. The real damage has been done by our denial, by the recent undermining of our faith in science and scientific reasoning, by our selfishness, our greed, our self-centeredness, our lack of empathy, our lack of a sense of social responsibility, our lack of patience and discipline, our inability to sacrifice a present pleasure for a future greater pleasure, and the disgusting way this whole thing has been politicized. All we had to do was stay

home for one month and watch television! Just one single month! But could we do it? Apparently not!

I think we could down the list on this. Is climate change, is global warming the problem? Is the problem income inequality? Racism? The fact that people in our country do not have health insurance, that children in our country and around the world go to bed hungry? Or is it us? Are we the problem, both individually and collectively?

I am presently reading yet another wonderful book. This one, written by the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Lama Zopa Rinpoche, is entitled *Bodhichitta: Practice for a Meaningful Life*. *Bodhichitta* is a Sanskrit word meaning “the mind of enlightenment” or “the enlightening mind.” It is the “mind” that wishes to achieve enlightenment in order to lead all other beings into that same state. It is the attitude of the bodhisattva, of the person who makes the compassionate vow to save others, to save all sentient beings from suffering.

The Tibetan Buddhist teachers like Shantideva (*A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*) throughout the ages use the term “self-cherishing” where I commonly use the term “ego-centric.” They believe the focus on ourselves, on our own happiness and pleasure, is the root of all evil, the cause of all suffering. I believe they have a point. This is what I understand to be at the heart of Jesus’ teaching to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. I find so many parallels between Tibetan Buddhist spirituality and the teachings of Jesus; I would like to lead a study group on this if anyone is interested.

Let me close with just a few quotes from Lama Zopa’s teaching. On page 189, he quotes Panchen Lama Chokyi Gyalsten in the *Guru Puja*:

The chronic disease of cherishing myself
is the cause giving rise to my unsought suffering.
Perceiving this, I seek your blessings to blame, begrudge,
and destroy the monstrous demon of selfishness.

Lama Zopa tells us that Lama Chokyi Gyaltsen regards the self-cherishing mind as a chronic disease because it is so deeply rooted within us, because it is so universal, and because it causes us and others so much suffering. Lama Zopa says,

We can do everything possible to rid ourselves of all the other problems that plague our life, but they are just the symptoms of this chronic disease. If we don’t destroy the root, we will always be beset with problems. Rather than trying to vanquish some external enemy, we should blame, begrudge, and destroy the self-cherishing mind.

We tend to externalize the cause or causes of our suffering. It is so easy to blame others, life, or even God. It is more challenging to look within ourselves. When we do, as the Tibetan Buddhists and Jesus tells us, we will often come face to face with our own self—cherishing. As Lama Zopa says,

This {substitute any example of individual or collective hardship or suffering here} hasn’t been created by any external factor but by the selfish, wanting mind, which has no regard for the other person. This situation was not created by God or the gods, although perhaps we can blame the great god of self-cherishing, the one god we really worship.

This is the god that we follow, that we offer service to day and night. Of course, this doesn't apply to everybody, but this is that way most of us live our life, dedicating ourselves to the self-cherishing mind.

I have always been struck by the way that Jesus responded to external situations or difficulties. With the exception of taking the Pharisees to task for being hypocrites, for betraying their sacred calling, he generally doesn't rail against the unfairness of life. He just calls us to change what needs to be changed—and he tells us to begin with ourselves. He tells us to repay enmity with love. He calls us to a life-stance of physical and verbal nonviolence. He tells us that even when someone unfairly abuses their power over us, asking us for our coat, we should give up our shirt as well. He tells us to walk the second mile. He tells us to forgive those who have been mean to us, who have hurt us, not seven times but seventy times seven. Then, while he was on the cross, he showed us how to do this.

I understand that woman's anger. And I accept it. Her prayer echoes so many of the psalms, articulations of the psalmists' anger at God for their individual and collective suffering. I know that some people believe that God micromanages the universe and our lives (I do not number among them). I just wonder if our railing against God or life or what we perceive as the injustices of life will provide us with the answer to our suffering. I have a feeling that both the cause and the solution (with God's help) lies within us all.

I actually find this hopeful!

Be well. Stay safe. Be patient. Be disciplined. Think of others. Keep the faith. See through the illusion, the delusion of the self-cherishing mind, the thief that takes away our sense of inner peace and that brings suffering to ourselves and others. Don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul