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Blessings, Everyone!

September 20, 2020

### **Keeping in Touch With Our Church Family**

Celebrations and Concerns:

We hold in prayer:

- All those who have lost loved ones at least partially due to COVID-19
- All those who are separated from loved ones due to the pandemic restrictions
- All those who cannot visit loved ones who are in the hospital or in nursing homes due to the pandemic restrictions
- All those whose jobs have been lost or whose lives have been not only disrupted but upended due to the pandemic

We hold in prayer:

- Mattie Cummings – who will be moving to Maine in early October, where she will initially be staying with her sister. We wish Mattie the very best in her new life! We wish we could send her off with a party where we would be able to tell her in person what a wonderful contribution she has made to the life of our church. I am sure she knows how much she means to us and that, wherever she goes, she will always be a part of us.
- Dianne Simmons – working as a nurse on the COVID-19 hospital front lines
- The other front-line workers, who are too often taken for granted

Thank you to:

- Jim Holmes – for faithfully ringing the church bell every Sunday morning and for sending us pictures of the church so we remember what it looks like
- All those who have been faithful in their yearly pledges to the General Fund
- The new members of our church family who are supporting us financially in ways that are helping us survive this difficult time.

We recently received a letter from the Worcester County Food Bank, whom we have supported (in addition to our own Southborough Food Pantry) for many years, thanking us for our support of their mission during this difficult time. Jean G. McMurray, the CEO of WCFB, wrote, *“This gift supports the mission of WCFB in a meaningful way. Every day, WCFB and our network of food pantries and community meal programs provide safe and nutritious food to people across Worcester County who are struggling with hunger—some for the first time. Every day, WCFB collaborates with a range of community partners to connect individuals and families to food and nutrition resources such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and [Meals4Kids.org](http://Meals4Kids.org) that support people in being more food secure and healthy. Food is fundamental to health and well-being and, together with our community partners and supporters, like First Community Church of Southborough, we are providing help and hope in a time of great uncertainty.”*

I like the way that WCFB collaborates with and supports local food banks/pantries like the one we have at Pilgrim Church here in Southborough. If you would like to support the Worcester County Food Bank, you can send your check to the church or to them directly.

There are times when we become so absorbed by our own situation, our own struggles, that we forget about others who are less fortunate than we.

We should hold in our prayers the individuals and families that are dependent upon the Worcester County Food Bank, local food pantries like ours, and community meals often provided by churches. I would especially like us to hold in our prayers those who are homeless right here in our own state. You may be surprised to learn that in the city of Boston alone, every night there are more than 3,800 children and parents who are homeless. They live in shelters, cars, and emergency rooms.

On my drive to Assumption College, where I taught for twenty-five years, some human service agency would regularly post a billboard along Route 290 just as you cross over the bridge to enter Worcester. It showed a mother and three children in a station wagon. I forget the exact words, but the billboard made it clear that this was their home. I thought of how difficult, how heartbreaking it must be for a mother not to be able to provide her children with a house, a home. I thought of the children who probably couldn't bathe, who went to bed hungry, and who went to school wearing the same clothes every day. Teachers, even in the suburbs, have told me that they are constantly on the lookout for children who wear the same wrinkled, dirty clothes every day; they try to discern whether these children are living out of the family car or on the streets, and then try to help them access resources. Would you believe that Boston has the third highest population of homeless parents and children among American cities? And that approximately 5,000 Boston Public Schools students are homeless?

The Boston Globe reported several months ago that Massachusetts had the highest percentage increase in family homelessness of any state since 2007. It is also the only state with a right to shelter, which means that if families can prove they are homeless for an eligible reason, such as a no-fault eviction or a natural disaster, the state is required to provide shelter for them. At the present time, there are 2,886 families in the state's emergency assistance program, which includes shelters and motels.

This problem, which is exacerbated by the skyrocketing cost of living in Boston and in most of Massachusetts, is being made much worse by the pandemic. We should keep this in mind in the upcoming elections. People running for statewide office should be asked what they intend to do to address the homeless crisis. And we should keep this in mind when we take out our checkbook to support organizations like the Worcester County Food Bank.

### **The Pastor's Reflections**

*"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."* (Matthew 5:11-12)

Just the other day, I was at a gathering of several professional people. During the course of the conversation, one of the men asked me what I did for a living. I asked him if he were raising the deep existential and spiritual question of how I understand what it means to truly live. If so, I would be happy to share my insights with him. If, however, he was simply asking me what I did for work, I am a psychologist, a marriage and family therapist, a pastoral counselor, a Jungian psychoanalyst, a retired college instructor, and I am also a Christian minister, the pastor of a small non-denominational church. The man listened attentively as I rattled off the impressive list of my credentials and/or areas of ministry. When I mentioned that I am a Jungian psychoanalyst, he didn't even blink an eye (probably because he didn't know what that means). However, when I told him that I am a Christian minister, he said, "Whoa!" and he involuntarily stepped back a step.

I realized immediately that I was being tarred with a very broad brush. Not to be taken aback, I immediately responded, "I'm not *that* kind of Christian." Then I added, "And, as I hope

you know, Jesus wasn't, either." The man just stood there with a startled look on his face, not knowing what to say. Then he turned and walked away.

OK. This conversation didn't really happen. I made it up. First, I don't get together with people—except on-line. Second, though I think an exchange like this could really happen, I would probably not be as clever in my response on the spot as I was in this imaginary exchange. I often think of clever things to say several hours or days after the conversation has ended. That's when I think, "When he/she said that, I should have said . . ."

Years ago, I saw a cartoon. The husband and wife were in bed together. She was lying down, her face turned away from him, obviously trying to go to sleep; he was sitting up in bed reviewing his day. In frame after frame, he replayed conversations from the day out loud, always ending with, "When my boss said this, I should have said . . ." "When the secretary said this, I should have said . . ." "When Joe asked me if he could use the copy machine ahead of me, I should have said . . ."

Finally, his wife, exasperated, turned her face toward him and said, "Should have, should have, should have! All you talk about is what you might have said or what you should have said!" The next frame showed them in their same positions in silence. In the final frame, as evidenced by a thought bubble, the husband said to himself, "When she said that, I should have said . . ."

A cute story about our tendency to play with hypotheticals, even to rewrite history to make ourselves look good or at least feel good. But that's not the point. I know that I have at least one foot over the line into an imaginary world. As David Lee Roth once said, "I know I live in my own little world, but at least everyone there likes me." (You do know who David Lee Roth is, don't you?)

I am quite sure that I know what the man was thinking when he said "Whoa" and stepped back. (Of course, I do. Since the conversation was imaginary, I can decide what he thinks and says.) I "know" that the man was thinking of the pastor in Maine who officiated at a wedding that resulted in the spread of the coronavirus to those who attended the wedding and then far beyond. The man was wondering if I were that kind of a minister. So, let me assure him, and also you, that I am not.

For those of you who have not been keeping up with the news, who have tired of the news, who experience the daily news as a mini-traumatizing event, and/or those who throw away an inordinate amount of time and energy following and actually rooting for the Boston Red Sox, let me fill you in on what happened in Maine.

First, however, let me bring you up to date on the Red Sox. Yes, they are still mired in last place in the American League East. Only two teams in all of major league baseball, Texas and Pittsburg, have worse records. The Sox have just lost the first two games of their series with the Yankees; they have lost all nine games they have played with their archrivals this year. As Peter Abraham of the Globe has said, that's not really a rivalry; its more like giving the bully your lunch money before he takes it away from you. But I digress.

On August 7, Todd Bell, the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Sanford Maine, officiated at a wedding that took place in Tri Town Baptist Church in Millinocket, approximately two hundred miles to the north. The reception following the ceremony was held at the Big Moose Inn in Millinocket. I am not sure how many people attended the wedding and reception, but you can be sure this particular celebration of love was not in accordance with state guidelines limiting the number of people who can participate in a gathering. You can also be sure that the wedding guests were not practicing social distancing, and they were not wearing masks.

To date, 144 COVID-19 cases and two deaths have been directly linked to this wedding. Neither of the persons who died had attended the wedding; they were infected by someone who had. The cases include 56 wedding guests and their secondary and tertiary contacts, 46 inmates and 19 staff members at the York County Jail, and 16 residents and employees of the Maplecrest Rehabilitation & Living Center in Madison, Maine.

Dr. Nirav D. Shaw, head of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, commenting on the coronavirus spread from this church service said, “No outbreak is an island. One outbreak can quickly lead to several more outbreaks.” If you want to know why we have not resumed in-person worship at First Community Church, this is why. We are a little more socially responsible than our brothers and sisters in Christ in these two churches in Maine and many others throughout the country, especially in the South. I like the way Dr. Shaw put it: “No outbreak is an island.” It’s about us, but it’s not only about us. According to the New York Times database, churches have been political battlegrounds as well as occasional hot spots throughout this pandemic. At a recent rally in New Hampshire, President Trump lamented that “Democrats don’t believe law-abiding citizens can go to church together. You can’t go to church anymore.” BTW, just because something can become politicized (and absolutely everything, apparently, can become politicized), doesn’t mean it’s political.

Calvary Baptist Church in Sanford, where Todd Bell is the pastor, is also experiencing an outbreak. They meet every Sunday in worship in person, *sans* masks and social distancing, “as God intends that we should.” On a recent Sunday at Calvary Baptist, according to the Boston Globe, a 15-person choir without masks assembled onstage and sang hymns. We really like our little choir in our church, but when we begin meeting in person again, you can be sure that our choir members will be sitting in the congregation with the rest of us.

But that’s not the point. Actually, it is. But it is not the only point. The real point is the rationale that Pastor Bell articulated in several sermons following the disclosure of the dissemination of the coronavirus from that one wedding throughout the state.

To summarize, Pastor Bell proudly maintains that his church is on the front lines of a culture war, that he and his church are leading the battle against a socialist platform that mandates mask wearing and distance learning in schools. He then goes on to say, “I’ll tell you what the world wants all the churches to do. They want us to shut down, go home, and let people get used to that just long enough until we can finally stop the advancing of the Gospel.” So “the world” wants to stop the advancing of the Gospel? To be honest, I was not aware that the Gospel was advancing. I’m not sure that the statistics regarding numbers of churches and numbers of members in Mainstream and Evangelical Protestant Churches, let alone Roman Catholic Churches, bear this out. If it is, indeed, true, I find this heartening! But I am, sadly, skeptical.

Pastor Bell was also quoted in several Boston Globe articles as saying that masks are about as ineffective in preventing the spread of the coronavirus as it would be if we were “trying to keep a mosquito out by using a chain-link fence.” I suspect that our educational system, at least the one in Maine, has failed Pastor Bell, at least when it comes to teaching and learning the fundamentals of science. There is a widespread and growing body of evidence in the scientific community that masks are, indeed, effective. Pastor Bell also exhorts us not to rely on a vaccine, but to “put our faith in God, the one that has the power to remove pestilences.” Once again, I believe that our educational system has failed him. But don’t get me going on the widespread belief that, if we pray, God will miraculously remove this “pestilence” from us! (I will be saying more about this in a future Keeping in (Virtual) Touch.)

The part of Pastor Bell’s sermon and later comments to the media that particularly caught my attention was a quote from Matthew 5:11-12. According to the translation of the Bible that we use in our church, the NRSV, this passage reads,

*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Pastor Bell then goes on record as saying, "Men have reviled me." I guess when someone disagrees with him, when someone (actually, many people) think that what he is doing and saying is stupid, and when people (like me) feel he is an embarrassment to Christianity, he is being "reviled." BTW, to revile is to treat as vile; to use abusive language to or about. I know—no one says that anymore, but it is a perfectly good word.

I think it is a stretch for Pastor Bell to imply that he is being reviled and persecuted "falsely" and "on Jesus' account." I think it is also a stretch to place himself in the august company of the prophets who were stoned to death for confronting the people with the ways that they were not living the life that God intended, and the early Christian apostles who were executed for holding fast to their faith.

With regard to Pastor Bell's patriotic stand against socialism (the mandate to wear masks and utilize distance learning), I'm not sure how protecting students, teachers, and their families from contracting the coronavirus is evidence of socialism. I would also note that the early Christian church, as described in the Book of Acts, was a socialist or communist society; everything was held in common and it was given to each according to his/her needs. I find it difficult to believe that Jesus is a big fan of free-market capitalism. I find it difficult to believe that Jesus would be opposed to Social Security, our attempt as a society to provide a safe, secure, financially sustainable retirement for our citizens. I find it difficult to believe that Jesus would be opposed to any country offering free public education from kindergarten through college, creating an educated citizenry and equipping people for meaningful employment in these rapidly evolving times. I find it difficult to believe that Jesus would take a stand against providing high quality health care and housing for all, that he would not want us to care for our environment and improve the quality of life for everyone. I have no idea where some Christians get the notion that true Christianity is incompatible with socialistic programs that would improve the general welfare. But apparently, for some pastors and churches, this is the "Gospel."

I was particularly amused/troubled by what I perceive to be Pastor Bell's assumption that he stands in the tradition of the martyrs and prophets. He views himself and his church (the "true Christians") as taking a stand against the forces of communism, socialism, secular materialism, humanism, and atheism. Apparently, they are even taking a stand against science. His stated assumption is that "the world" is threatened by the ("true") Christian church, that "they" are afraid of the Gospel, that they want to silence it, that they want to prevent evangelization (the preaching of the Gospel, the "Good News"), and that they want to destroy the Christian church.

I confess, in all humility, that Pastor Bell's identification with those who were persecuted for their faith sounds a little inflated to me. I was not aware that the humanists, the atheists, the secular materialists, and the socialists are shaking in their boots at the rapid spread of the Christian gospel. Although I am a Christian minister and am deeply committed to the ministry of the church, I suspect that for most people in our society and throughout the western world, the church is perceived as somewhere on the spectrum from irrelevant to benign to moderately helpful, and at times (sadly) as taking a stand against human rights and dignity. I doubt if it is generally perceived as a revolutionary agent of social change. As Lenny Bruce once said, "Every day more and more people are leaving the church and going back to God." When I think of all the rich spiritual traditions from which people around the world draw, I suspect this is true. The challenge for us as the church is to help people find God, deepen their relationship with God, and by changing ourselves, change the world in which we live. This is truly the "Good News" proclaimed by Jesus!

I think that Pastor Bell has identified with an archetype. Let me tell you what an archetype is. Jung tells us that within the collective unconscious, there are inborn, innate psychic structures that shape the way we connect with or relate to the outside world. For example, there is a mother archetype, a father archetype, a child archetype. There is an archetype of healer, of therapist, of teacher, of leader. There is a hero archetype, a warrior archetype, a trickster archetype, and a victim archetype. There is a Fuhrer archetype. There is an archetypal dimension to the role of prophet, guide, priest, pastor, and monastic. There is an archetypal dimension to martyrdom that would empower someone to suffer and sacrifice in the service of a higher cause. Beneath all of these, and the numerous other archetypes, is the archetype of Divinity. It is this that underlies all the various gods and goddesses that have emerged and have been worshipped in different cultures throughout history.

Jung warns us that when we identify with one of these archetypes, we become inflated. An example of this would be Pope Innocent III who declared, "I am the church." Pope Innocent, as the leader of the western or Roman Church, had an important role to play in the life and teaching of the church of his day, but he was not the church. When we believe we are one with the archetype, we lose touch with our humanity and our humility. When we identify with an archetype, all of our behavior, no matter how immoral or even evil, is rationalized. The end justifies the means. We lose the capacity for conscious self-reflection, for an awareness of our own shadow. We then become a danger to others and to the world.

I know that Pastor Bell *feels* reviled and persecuted in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and the early Christian apostles. But he isn't. He just has to wear a mask and practice social distancing to protect himself, his flock, and the many others that he and his flock could potentially infect with the coronavirus. FYI, thanks to Bill Guenon who sent me this, according to history/legend we know how *real* martyrs die:

Matthew was killed by a sword wound in Ethiopia.

Mark was dragged to death by horses through the streets of Alexandria, Egypt.

Luke was hanged in Greece.

John was boiled in a huge basin of boiling oil during a wave of persecution in Rome.

However, he was miraculously delivered from death and was sentenced to the mines on the Island of Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation. He was later freed and returned to serve as Bishop of Edessa in modern Turkey. He died of old age, the only apostle to die peacefully.

Peter was crucified upside down on an X-shaped cross because he told his executioners that he felt unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord.

James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, was thrown down from the pinnacle of the Temple when he refused to deny his faith in Christ. When it was discovered that he had survived the fall of over a hundred feet, his enemies beat him to death with a club.

James, the son of Zebedee, was beheaded at Jerusalem.

Bartholomew, also known as Nathaniel, a missionary to Asia, was martyred for his preaching in Armenia, where he was flayed to death.

Andrew was crucified on an X-shaped cross in Patmos, Greece.

Thomas was stabbed with a spear in India.

Jude was shot with arrows.

Matthias was stoned and then beheaded.

Paul was tortured and then beheaded by Nero in Rome.

And so, I say to Pastor Bell, this is what *real* martyrs look like. If you are being reviled, it is because you are doing something stupid while believing that it is evidence of a higher spirituality. Wear your mask. Social distance. Follow the guidelines established by the CDC and your state. Try being socially responsible. Don't deceive yourself—you are not a Christian martyr. You are actually an embarrassment to Christianity. You are inflated with a sense of

your own importance, and you are leading your mindlessly loyal flock down a dangerous road. The blood of their deaths and the deaths of their loved ones are on your hands.

Pastor Bell, if this is of any consolation to you, I want you to know that you are not the worst. Last year, Ireland banned an Arizona-based pastor, Steven L. Anderson, from entrance into its country with the hope of “converting the heathen of Ireland.” Anderson’s Faithful Word Baptist Church, which he founded in 2005, has been labeled a hate group by the Southern Policy Law Center and by the Anti-Defamation League. Anderson gained notoriety in 2009 when he announced that he hated President Obama and prayed for his death. He has called for the United States to exterminate all gay people and welcomed the murder of 49 people in the mass shooting at Pulse gay nightclub in Orlando in 2016. He is a Holocaust denier. His anti-Semitism shows in his belief that the Talmud teaches that it is not a sin for a Jew to cheat a Gentile. His church rejects the freedom for a woman to choose abortion and to use birth control. He had intended to evangelize in Ireland until Charlie Flanagan, Ireland’s minister for justice and equality, stepped in and barred him from entering. BTW, Anderson has also been denied entry to or been deported from Botswana, Canada, Jamaica, Malawi, South Africa, and the twenty-six European countries that are part of the Schengen free travel area.

Once again, I wonder what part of the Gospel Pastor Anderson is reading. I suspect that he is neither reading what Jesus taught or does he have a personal relationship with Jesus. If he did, he would not be spewing this message of hate from his pulpit.

Pastor Bell, although you are (probably/hopefully) not in this category, I want you to know that I, and many like me, are not your or Pastor Anderson’s kind of Christian. And, by the way, neither was Jesus. Unfortunately, when some people (like the man with whom I had the conversation) think of Christians and the Christian church, this is what comes to mind.

When I read of churches like Pastor Bell and Pastor Anderson’s, I become even more deeply convinced that churches like ours need to exist. We might not be big/rich/powerful, but we have an important message to bring to and to incarnate in the world, a message of acceptance, respect, compassion, and love. We believe that this is the true Gospel, and that Jesus is working both in and through us to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. Accordingly, we take a stand against the white supremacy from which so many of us, including your pastor, have benefitted, against racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and we are open, affirming, and welcoming of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters.

And so, I say to you, be well. Stay safe. Be patient. Be disciplined. Persevere. Don’t give up. Think of others. Care. Keep the faith. Focus on the broader, the bigger vision. 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. Trust in God. Don’t throw anything precious away. Repair the breaks in your life and in your relationships with gold. Take time to be with nature, to be in nature, to appreciate landscapes. Be socially responsible. Think about what it means to be a real Christian. Don’t let the light go out.

Pastor Paul