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Blessings, Everyone!

September 27, 2020

Keeping in Touch With Our Church Family

Celebrations and Concerns:

We hold in prayer:

Those who have lost loved ones at least partially due to COVID-19

Those who are separated from loved ones due to the pandemic restrictions

Those who cannot visit loved ones who are in the hospital or in nursing homes due to the pandemic restrictions

Those whose jobs have been lost or whose lives have been disrupted or upended due to the pandemic

All those who have suffered from the massive fires in California and Oregon

All those who have suffered from the flooding from tropical storms/hurricanes in Texas and Louisiana

Our country. Pray for our country!!

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.

The Diaconate, who have been meeting to discuss various options regarding worship services and the possibly reopening of our church

We recently received a letter from Church World Service, thanking us for our support of their mission during this difficult time. The Reverend John L. McCullough, President and CEO, wrote,

Thank you for your generous contribution, which we appreciate more than ever in these challenging times.

Your compassionate support is helping impoverished communities develop clean, reliable water sources. Working with farmers to continue to put food on their tables, even in the face of uncertainty. And providing food, water, shelter and other necessities to families struggling to rebuild their lives and livelihoods in times of crisis.

I have seen the resilience and resolve of the people and communities we assist. And I have been deeply moved by the generosity of people like you, who give hope and opportunity to people in need, here in the U. S. and around the world.

Worship Service Plans

At our September 13 Diaconate meeting, we discussed several options for holding various types of worship services during a period of coronavirus restrictions that is stretching out a lot longer than we originally anticipated. My son, Corey, helped us by sharing his experiences and the experiences of clergy with whom he has communicated on the pros and cons of several

options. Corey is technologically savvy (apparently this ability is not genetic). After discussing the various options, the Diaconate and I were unanimous in our selection of the option which we will begin this week.

Let me explain the various options we explored and how we came to the decision we did.

The first option we explored is an on-line virtual church service on Zoom that will be held at the time we regularly attend worship, 11:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings. Studies show that approximately 20-40% of regular worship attenders will actually log in regularly at the given time. This means that if we normally have twenty people in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, we could realistically expect somewhere between four and eight to log on. These numbers raise the question of whether it would be worth the time and effort.

To participate in this kind of service, which involves downloading the Zoom app, is a technological leap for many, especially older church members (who tend more toward the 20%). I confess it would be a stretch for me; I have only done 1-1 Zoom meetings with my counselees, not groups. From my own experience even with 1-1 Zoom invitations, there are often problems logging on, with the screen freezing, and with time lags between the spoken word as mouthed and when the word arrives by sound. Also, during the worship service, background noise from people's houses can be distracting to other worshippers because every computer becomes a microphone for ambient sound. Contrast this with our traditional church service, which is quiet. Also, as I mentioned in my first Keeping in (Virtual) Touch missive when I expressed my objections to virtual worship, we are not really gathered together in worship. It is a poor substitute for what we had, for what is so important and meaningful to us.

Offering a worship service through Zoom or Facebook would basically split the members of our church family into two groups: those who can use the platform and those who can't. We would unintentionally be excluding some people from worship, which is not the way we traditionally operate. I, for one, do not do Facebook, and our past attempts to set up a Facebook page for the church were less than successful. A service like this is also essentially time-bound; if you miss the 11:00 a.m. service, you miss it. There is no flexibility for people who may be busy with other commitments.

To do a virtual on-line worship service, we would need a tech person to handle the audio-visuals so I could do the service; I can't do both. Some churches have such a person in their congregation; others have the resources to hire a professional person to do this. We don't.

The second option is to do a pre-recorded worship service that I could record in my home study or office. This could be posted on YouTube, though this in itself would present a problem for some of us (including me). The general rule of thumb is that the more technology that is involved, the more people that are involved in the process, the more problems there are. It goes against the basic principle or guideline of Occam's Razor. I would still need a tech person to do this, and it would apparently take up to two hours to upload the worship service from my computer to YouTube. Quite frankly, this is way out of my technological comfort zone.

The third option is to build on what we already have established through the use of basic email. Over the past few months, I have put together an expanded church contact list that consists of church members, members of our larger church family, and anyone else who would like to receive our Keeping in (Virtual) Touch missives. Since the response to my reflection section in the missives has been overwhelmingly positive, the Diaconate and I decided that we should stay with that. That is also what Corey recommended (he is on our contact list). We will be bracketing my reflection, which is more like a homily than a formal sermon, with a reading of one or two scripture lessons and several prayers. So, the order of service for this weekly devotional will be:

Call to Worship
Prayer of Invocation
Scripture Lesson(s)
Reflection
Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer
Benediction

I will also explore in the coming weeks how we might add a short piece of sacred music to one or both ends of the service. As I understand it, I will not be able to start and stop the recording to add music; it will have to be done all at the same time.

I will audio record the service on my iPhone (which I am able to do). Then I will download it to my Mac computer (which I am able to do). Then I will send it as an attachment to David Crane, our webmaster, to post on our church website (which I am able to do). It will be posted as an audio recording, not an audiovisual recording, the way my sermons have traditionally been recorded and posted. This means that anyone who wants to access my reflections in the context of a devotional service will be able to listen to them through our website. Those of you who are on our church contact list and are already receiving Keeping in (Virtual) Touch by email will continue to have the printed reflections emailed directly to you, and the reflections will be posted in printed form (as they now already are) on our church website. We have also been trying to put together a list of church members who do not use the internet so we can mail a printed copy of my reflection to them every week.

Let's try this option and see how it works. I believe our choice excludes the fewest number of people. We may find, as we go on, that there are ways that we can build on this, and I welcome reality-based feedback and suggestions. Please note the qualifier "reality-based," which basically means my personal reality as a marginally technological Luddite. If I can't do it, it can't be done.

Quote/Thought of the Day

"Technically, Moses was the first person with a tablet downloading data from the cloud."

A Second Quote/Thought of the Day

"When you come to a fork in the road, take it." (Yogi Berra)

The Pastor's Reflections

(This reflection will be posted in an audio form as part of a devotional service on our church website: www.firstcommunitychurch.com)_

OK. I admit it. I caved.

Everyone in my family knows "the rule." The rule is that we don't turn on the heat in our house until after Halloween. After all, we are New Englanders. We're not like the "snowflakes" who go south when the frost is on the pumpkin and return with the robins in spring. We tough it out without turning on the air conditioning until we absolutely have to every summer. This is who we are. We are as close to being survivalists as you can get (in a comfortable, heated, air-conditioned house in a suburban setting well south of the Arctic Circle).

Last Sunday night, I turned on the heat. The temperature was in the high 50's in our family room. I tried to convince Darlene that it would help if we could imagine that we were actually attending the Patriots-Seahawks game, sitting together all bundled up in the stands. She responded that no one actually goes to games in person anymore. I hate to be confronted with reality.

I then asked her if she would please not tell anyone, especially our children and members of our church family, that I had caved. I like to pretend every year that I stuck to my

guns, that I made it to Halloween whether I did so or not, though I confessed to her that I do feel a little uncomfortable telling people something that isn't true. She said that if I were to read the past few Keeping in (Virtual) Touch missives, I would realize that that boat had already sailed. Ouch!

When she said that, I should have said . . .

Just one more comment about the Red Sox and Yankees. This will be the last thing I say, at least in this venue, I swear it. One of you (I'm not saying who) had the unmitigated gall to suggest that I was putting the Red Sox down because I am jealous of them. The person pointed out that the Red Sox have won the World Series four times in the past two decades: 2004, 2007, 2013, and 2018, while the Yankees, in the same time period, have won only twice: 2000 and 2009.

This is indeed true. However, we should note that the Sox ended up in last place in the American League East in 2012, 2014, 2015, and now in 2020, four times in eight years, while the Yankees haven't finished in last place in their division since 1990. In fact, the Yankees, the "Evil Empire," have finished in last place only four times *in their history*, the same number of times the Sox have "achieved" since 2012. I would also point out that the Red Sox have won the World Series 9 times in their "storied" history, while the Yankees have won this coveted title 27 times. That's right—*27 times!* I think I have made my point. The Yankees have been a model of consistency, while the Sox have been manic depressive, habitually greasing the path from first place to last, from heaven to hell year after year after year.

In all honesty, however, I have to admit that Alex Verdugo's numbers are just as good as Mookie Betts' this year. Mookie receives \$27 million from the Los Angeles Dodgers, while I bet that Alex is lucky if he receives \$5 million. Also, I really like Tanner Houck, one of the first home-grown pitchers for the Red Sox with promise in many years. I actually think that the Sox could do very well next year.

But that's not the point. What was the point? Oh yes. The point is why I am spending so much time watching and following and thinking about, and even writing in these missives about the triumphs and tragedies of the Red Sox and the Yankees, the puzzling short-lived run for the Stanley Cup by our highly touted Bruins (with arguably the best first line in the NHL); the fate of our Patriots *sans* Tom Brady & Gronk (we are doing quite well with Cam Newton, thank you); and the way our scrappy Celtics are hanging on by a very thin thread in their battle with the Miami Heat. When I am not watching sports, I am watching the Hallmark Movies and Mysteries Channel; you can't get any more wholesome than *Good Witch* (although I am also drawn to *The Pioneer Woman* on the Food Channel and reruns of *Friends*). Just the other night, I convinced Darlene to watch a few segments of *The Twilight Zone* in black and white (it was actually better than I had remembered it; each story had a theme, a significant message). I, of course, am continuing my reading; I am working my way through Jung's *Collected Works*, and I have begun to explore our daughter's recently published book offering numerous options of clinical exposures for the treatment of anxiety disorders. Need I say that Darlene and I are very proud of her? She already has more publications than her dad!

In addition to caving, to finding an escape from what I perceive to be an intolerable situation, a state of affairs that is not in the service of life in turning up the heat in our house "before its time," I confess that I am having a difficult time being present to, tolerating, watching, listening to, or reading about the pandemic, the daily statistics of new cases and new deaths in our state, in our country, around the world, and the attendant lack of discipline, the lack of social responsibility, the lack of even a marginal grasp of science that characterizes the response of many people in elected office and a startling number of our fellow citizens. In addition to the pandemic and our individual and collective responses to it, I find myself turning away from or turning a blind eye to the troubling, disturbing, disgusting, depressing machinations on so many levels that are going on under the direction or auspices of our current Administration.

I have found that I can't read everything that is in the morning newspaper; it is too disturbing. I have backed off from watching CNN, a source of news and analysis that I deeply respect, and I will be taking a pass on the debates; I suspect they will not be good for me. I take scant comfort in the knowledge that I am not alone in this. This past week, almost all of my counselees spent a significant amount of time during their Zoom sessions expressing their feelings of anger, anxiety, depression, and despair about our President and his boot-licking lackeys, including those senators who argued four years ago that we should not rush through a Supreme Court nomination and who now, hypocritically, have totally reversed their stance. Some of my counselees have suggested a rewrite of Dante's Divine Comedy to include a few more levels of hell with appropriate punishments that they describe in great detail and share with obvious relish.

Let me talk just a little bit about the phenomenon of dissociation, because I believe that this (to some extent, to a limited extent) is what many of us are experiencing. BTW, if you would like to learn a lot about dissociation and how it is an initially healthy (though later pathological) response to the experience of trauma, especially the kind of trauma that so many people have experienced in childhood, I refer you to a magnificent work by the Jungian analyst Donald Kalsched entitled, *Trauma and the Soul: A Psycho-Spiritual Approach to Human Development and Its Interruption*.

Dissociation is basically a psychic process by which a person disconnects in a radical way with what is going on in his/her life, specifically the thoughts and feelings that arise from the experience of trauma. Whatever the situation is, it is more than the individual (often the child) can handle, can process, can consciously experience and integrate. To prevent being flooded by emotion and experiencing an emotional breakdown or psychosis, the person "leaves the scene," so to speak. The leaving of the scene can be so total, so successful, that even the memory, the recollection of the traumatic event may be repressed. The repressed memory can, however, be retrieved, be re-membered, be experienced, and be healed through the process of anamnesis. Anamnesis, a term which I believe was coined by Sigmund Freud, is an *an-
amnesia*, an un-forgetting (which is basically a remembering). This happens quite often in psychotherapy, especially within a depth psychology approach, and it happens with all the attendant feelings of horror, etc. that were part of the original experience. Pleasant? Definitely not. Healing? Yes.

Some of the symptoms of dissociation include amnesia or memory loss; depersonalization--feeling disconnected from your own body; derealization--feeling disconnected from the world around you; and identity confusion--not having a sense of who you are. The dissociative disorders that need professional treatment are dissociative amnesia, dissociative fugue, depersonalization disorder, and dissociative identity disorder. Dissociative Identity Disorder is the new diagnostic name for what used to be called Multiple Personality Disorder. And yes, it does exist. Jung described it in the early part of the twentieth century. The new diagnostic category ties this psychic syndrome more specifically to the experience of trauma, for multiple sub-personalities usually emerge and take up a separate, autonomous, split-off identity following a severe trauma.

While I don't believe I fall within the designated diagnostic dissociative categories that are described in the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5), I have a sense on a very small scale of what a person who is dissociating experiences. Whatever is going on is just too much. Too much to handle. Too much to accept. Too much to integrate. And so, we turn away. We look away. We avert our gaze.

Two hundred thousand. Two hundred thousand lives lost to COVID-19 in our country alone. That's a lot of people. That's the total population of Lowell and Lawrence (not that I am picking on people from Lowell and Lawrence—Darlene and I used to live in Lowell). The pandemic takes 1,200 of our brothers and sisters, sometimes our loved ones, every day. The

death toll in our state alone has passed 9,000. A million people have died from this virus throughout the world—and many of these deaths were preventable.

And so, we look away. We follow sports or collect recipes from The Food Channel. Or, we re-frame a reality that is horrifying. Only 15 people died in Massachusetts yesterday; it was a good day. As I mentioned in one of my previous reflections, this is the way I used to process the daily tally of casualties in the Vietnam War. If “they” lost more soldiers than “we” did, it was a good day. If I had actually thought of each of these numbers as a human being, for even the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese were human beings, it would have been more than I could have handled, more than I could have consciously processed and integrated into my psychic reality.

What I am saying is that we can only take so much. We are hard-wired to dissociate in the face of horror, of tragedy. Women who have been raped describe how “they” or “their soul” left their body and hovered above, coming down to re-enter the body only when it was safe to do so. “He had the power to violate my body, but he could not touch my soul.” There is something inside each and every one of us that wants to keep “us” safe, to protect that core part of our identity, our soul. Perhaps, if we are lucky, we will re-experience the horror of what happened through an anamnesis, for this will happen only when we are strong enough to do so, only when we can do so within the safety of an accepting, loving relationship.

We need to look away. We need to avert our gaze. And yet we have to look. We have to face what has happened and what is happening. We have to look at the Holocaust, which Holocaust deniers resist doing. We have to look at what has happened to Black people in our country, how we turned human beings into slaves, into something less than human, into things that could be bought and sold. We have to look at the cross burning, the lynching, the torture of blacks for pleasure or to enforce racial dominance, and we have to look at the way that the police system in our country, which initially came into being to hunt down runaway slaves, has traditionally functioned, and still does, as a way to protect and enforce white supremacy, white dominance, to protect white property. We have to look at what we, all of us, are doing to our environment. We have to look at the determined movement to refuse equal rights to women, our inability to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, and to refuse women sovereignty over their own bodies. We have to look at the brutal effects of income inequality, the crushing burden of poverty, and the effort to disenfranchise so many of our citizens, especially members of minority groups, of their constitutional right to vote. We have to look. We have to face what has happened throughout our history and what is happening today. And we have to act—though it is not always easy to decide how we can do this.

We have to look. But how can we look honestly and searchingly at something that horrifies us? How can we look honestly and searchingly at a state of affairs that we find depressing, that awakens feelings of despair and strange forebodings of an imminent dystopia? How can we find a way to look at what is happening in our country and around the world without being filled with anger, fear, anxiety, and a feeling of powerlessness? We have to find a way to look and not to look.

For me, the answer lies in a single line from T. S. Eliot’s poem, *Ash Wednesday*. I really like T. S. Eliot. I wish I were as smart as he was. I wish I were just smart enough to understand his poems, his plays, with all their mythological and literary associations. This guy was not only really intelligent and well educated, he was really deep. And he was originally from St. Louis Missouri (go figure!).

Ash Wednesday, for those of you who are relatively unchurched, is a day of repentance, which is something our country needs and all of us need more than once a year at the beginning of the liturgical season of Lent. In his poem, Eliot says,

*Teach us to care and not to care.
Teach us to sit still.*

I think Eliot is onto something here. We have to find a way to care and not to care. We need to care enough to look squarely and honestly at our country and also to look at ourselves with all the troubling, distressing feelings that this sociological, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scene evokes. And yet, we need to maintain some sense of detachment. We need to retain a sense of psychic equilibrium. We should never become so detached that we fail to look at a reality that calls us to respond in whatever way or ways we can, that calls us to acknowledge our own relative helplessness in addressing problems that are much bigger than we can grasp let alone solve. We need to be involved and yet keep a certain psychic distance. We need to care and not to care.

I think of the encounter of Jesus with the rich young man. The rich young man asks Jesus what he must do to experience eternal life. Jesus tells him to obey the laws that are stipulated by his religion. This, by the way, is a rule-based response. Perhaps this is where we need to start. The man indicates that he has done this, that he has led a good, a moral, a righteous life from birth. He asks if there is something more that he needs to do.

It is recorded that Jesus looks on the man “lovingly.” Here is where Jesus moves to a relational rather than a rule-based center of religion. He tells the rich young man that there are two more things he needs to do. First, he needs to sell all that he has and give the proceeds to the poor. Then he needs to follow Jesus; he needs to become a disciple of the Way.

Upon hearing this, the rich young man turns and sadly walks away. His attachment to his possessions was too great. As the Buddhists (and Jesus) teach us, attachments, grasping, selfishness, and greed lead to suffering, suffering in others and a different kind of suffering in ourselves. Jesus just stands still and watches the young man depart. He watches him walk away with a feeling of sadness that matches that which the rich young man also feels. Jesus then tells his disciples that it is more difficult for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a person who is attached to his/her wealth, his/her possessions, his/her power to enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus is obviously saddened by the young man’s choice. But it is his choice. Jesus respects his choice. It seems to me that it is not that the young man has made the wrong choice; he has simply made his choice. And Jesus would never take away the power and the responsibility of each of us to make our own choices in life. Jesus cared, but he also didn’t care. He didn’t chase after the man, begging, pleading, trying to persuade him that he was making a mistake. He cared, but he let him go.

I think of what it must be like to be a physician. Your patient, for whom you care deeply, has COPD and emphysema. He has difficulty breathing. He is on oxygen. And yet he continues to smoke cigarettes. You tell him that it would be in his best interest to give up smoking. He responds that he is thinking about it, but he isn’t ready to do it yet. You tell him that he doesn’t have a lot of time to think this through. He responds that he finds the withdrawal symptoms quite unpleasant. You agree, but you note that dying from lack of air is also quite unpleasant. Your patient shrugs.

You, as a physician, are faced with a problem. How do you continue to care about this patient, to care for him when he will not cooperate with you in your attempts to guide him into a healthier lifestyle? You could show him the door and tell him to come back when he wants to take his health, his life seriously. This would be detaching. You could also become angry at him, your anger arising from the realization that you care more about him than he does for himself. What do you need to do? You need to care and not to care. I think that achieving this stance must be quite challenging for most caring, compassionate physicians.

*Teach us to care and not to care.
Teach us to sit still.*

One of my counselees, a person who is deeply spiritual and who is highly attuned to energy healing, made a casual remark this past week. He said that we all know the spiritual truth that “what you resist persists.” I thought, “No, we don’t all know this.” When we do battle with something, we give it energy. When we hate someone, we give them power over us. Our hatred feeds them; it adds to the energy field that they have created. My counselee reminded me that it is better to think positive than think negative. It is better to think about how we would like to change our country for the better than to experience rage that it is the way it is. It is better to think about whom we would like to elect as president, governor, senator, representative, Supreme Court Justice, than to be angry at the ones who presently hold office. My counselee apparently thinks everyone knows this. They don’t. There are times when I have “known” this, but then this profound spiritual truth drifts away, it disappears from my inner computer screen. And even if we know this spiritual teaching to be true, we need to be reminded of it again and again and again.

When you are feeling overwhelmed, and especially when you find yourself flooded with anger, with rage, with fear, with a desire for control, for power, just sit still. This is what T. S. Eliot says we should do. We should just sit still. As the French philosopher Blaise Pascal has said, “All of humanity’s problems stem from our inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” We need to return to our true Centre. There is a Buddhist saying:

*Sitting quietly, doing nothing.
Spring comes,
and the grass grows all by itself.*

Although the grass does grow all by itself, I am not convinced that our country can become the country, the nation, the society that God would like it to be, without each and every one of us doing our part, doing whatever we can to bring about the state of affairs that God wills for us and for all God’s children. But whatever we do should be done out of this sense of being centered, of finding ourselves within our true Centre, and then acting out of this beautiful inner space. This is what Jesus did.

We need to learn how to care and not to care. We need to learn how to be both engaged and detached at the same time. This will not be easy for us to do, but then, it is generally not an easy undertaking to incarnate a paradox.

We can do it. I know we can. We can defeat the powers of evil in others and also within ourselves. And that for which we hope, long, and work will become a living reality for us and for all God’s children. I know deep down that this will happen if we all do our part.

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. Learn how to care and not to care; learn how to sit still, to be centered. Don’t let the light go out.

Pastor Paul