

The First Community Church of Southborough
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Blessings, Everyone!

Keeping in Touch With Our Church Family

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, whose businesses have been shut down, or whose lives have been disrupted or upended due to the pandemic
 - those who are suffering from the devastating fires in California and Oregon
 - those who have suffered from the flooding from tropical storms/hurricanes in Texas and Louisiana
 - those who suffer from the stain on their soul that is called racism
- our country. Pray for our country!! Really!!! It stands in need of good vibrations!

Thank you to:

- Jim Holmes – for faithfully ringing the church bell at 11:00 a.m. 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 regularly to discuss various options regarding worship services and the procedure we will need to follow regarding the eventual reopening of our church

Celebration!

We have a big celebration and an enthusiastic “Thank you!” to extend to David Park, a friend of the church, who has graciously offered to donate his baby grand piano to our church! A Mason & Hamlin, one of the big names in pianos, it was built in Haverhill in 1931, the golden days of this model. It was formerly owned by Yehudi Menuhin who, in addition to an accomplished pianist, was also a world-renowned violinist. He apparently signed the piano, though we do not have the documents to prove it. It is possible that PBS, who sold the piano some time ago on one of its public auctions, might be able to locate the documents. The action of the piano has recently been completely restored with the current standard, titanium; the keys and felts are new.

When I first heard about David’s offer, I contacted Michael, who was thrilled at the opportunity to have such a magnificent instrument grace our sanctuary. He said that he had often thought about moving the piano we have up front, but this is much better. The Trustees also gave their enthusiastic blessing, noting that if we needed more space in the front right of the sanctuary, we could remove the first pew, which is rarely used. We all agreed that the best place for a 5’8” baby grand was in the right front of the main floor of the sanctuary, where it could be used for piano preludes, postludes, piano-accompanied anthems, and hymn sings, which Michael could finally lead from the front. We decided to keep the small spinet where it is in case substitute

pianists might prefer to be in the back. Darlene and I offered to pay for the piano to be professionally moved.

This past Thursday morning, the piano was moved in and set up by Bushnell piano movers. It looks and sounds great! When we begin worshipping in the sanctuary again, since our worship will most likely be on a somewhat restricted basis with no choir and no singing, it will work out well to have both Michael and me up front. Michael has also graciously offered to give a piano recital for church members and friends, perhaps on a Sunday afternoon or evening, to dedicate the new piano for worship in our church.

So, David, thank you so much for this very generous gift! You can be sure that your piano has found a good home, which was your intent, and that it will be put to good use when we finally return to our sanctuary for worship.

Missions:

We recently received a letter from Heifer International thanking us for our support of their mission during this difficult time. Pierre Ferrari, President and CEO, wrote, *I can't imagine the pain a parent feels when they cannot feed their child. But sadly, far too many children around the world go hungry every single day. They go to sleep with empty stomachs, not knowing if breakfast will be on the table when they wake up. Because you're a compassionate friend of Heifer, I know that, like me, you find this both heartbreaking and absolutely unacceptable. No precious child should ever worry about when their next meal will be—and no parent should have to see their child go to bed hungry. But thanks to your recent gift of \$310, fewer families will have to face hunger and live in poverty. I want to thank you for your inspiring generosity—especially at such a critical moment for the world's most vulnerable people. Your kindness will make a difference that can be profound and permanent. This means your kindness will give more families livestock, support, and resources to live free from hunger and poverty. When they receive Heifer cows, goats, chicks, or bees and learn how to care for their animals and better cultivate their crops, they receive a transformative lifeline to a brighter tomorrow. Because of you, parents no longer have to watch, heartbroken and hopeless, as their family goes hungry. They can feed their children and earn a reliable income to pay for medicine and school. But right now, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more challenging than ever for family farmers to sell what they produce and buy nourishing food for their children. With your help, Heifer is working to ensure that families can adapt and innovate. This allows them to provide for their own loved ones and their communities—and build lasting food systems to address this new normal. Your thoughtful gift shows just how much you truly care about hardworking families around the world, especially in the most challenging of times. Thank you for your compassion and stay well!*

I know that many of us are having a difficult time negotiating this “new normal.” However, we need to remember that there are people around the world who are hurting, who are struggling more than we. We need to hold these people in our thoughts (though, as I mentioned last week, this is admittedly difficult to do on a sustained basis). We need to hold them in our prayers, and we need to reach out to them anyway we can—through using our vote and our voice to shape public policy, and through making a direct donation to a non-profit organization that addresses these needs. If you would like to contribute to this very worthwhile cause, please send your donation either directly to Heifer International or make your check out to First Community Church and send it to us; we will forward it to Heifer.

Worship Service Plans

Starting last week, we will be offering a pre-recorded weekly worship service that I will record in my home study or office, not in the sanctuary. This service can be accessed directly through

the home page of our church website: www.firstcommunitychurch.com; it is in the audio section of the sermon section. Each service will be listed by date. The order of service will be as follows:

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

The Reflection will be the reflection that I am currently sending to those of you who are on our expanded church contact list, a list that is comprised of church members, members of our larger church family, and friends of the church, those who have asked to be put on our mailing list. The reflection is also accessible in printed form on our website in the sermon section.

We are currently in the process of compiling 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. If you know of anyone who falls into this category, please let me know.

There is, of course, no substitute for meeting together as the gathered church for Sunday worship in our beautiful sanctuary and then celebrating fellowship in our coffee hour (or hour-and-a-half) semi-luncheon downstairs in the vestry following the service. We will return. I promise!

Quote/Thought of the Day

"Nothing great is ever achieved without much enduring."

Catherine of Siena

Catherine of Siena, who lived from 1347-1380 (not very long), was an Italian Dominican religious. Catherine and Francis are the patron saints of Italy.

A Second Quote/Thought of the Day

"Good pitching will always beat good hitting. And vice versa." Casey Stengel

Attention-Grabbing Church Signs

"Adam & Eve—The First People to Not Read the Apple Terms & Conditions"

Taken From (Apparently Unedited) Church Sunday Morning Bulletins

"Next Sunday, Mrs. Jones will be the soloist for the morning service. The Pastor will then speak on "It's a Terrible Experience."

The Pastor's Reflection

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

This past week I found myself continuing to think about the matter of how to handle, how to process, how to respond to all that is going on in the world, in our country, and in our lives. I am thinking, of course, of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the current state of affairs in our nation's capital, the fascist, neo-Nazi movements in our country and around the world, and the revival of racial and ethnic animosity. It is enough to test the spirit of even an avowed optimist like me! It forces us to consider whether we as a race are evolving, whether we are moving forward into the kind of world that God intends for us, whether we are truly functioning as co-creators with God of a just society where people of all races, ethnic origins, genders, sexual orientations, and religious beliefs can live together in peace and harmony, and where we can work together as brothers and sisters, as children of God, to create a better world, a better life for all.

Last week I offered what I hoped was a helpful bit of advice from T. S. Eliot who, in his poem *Ash Wednesday*, wrote,

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

I believe Eliot is encouraging us to find a way to remain engaged and yet maintain a healthy detachment, to be involved and at the same time to respect our need for boundaries to preserve our equilibrium, our mental health. Today, I would like to push this strain of thought a little further.

Back at the beginning of the pandemic lockdown, I read a fascinating book entitled *Seven Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering*. It was written by Scott Samuelson, who teaches philosophy to students at Kirkwood Community College (an exceptionally good community college in Iowa City, Iowa), and who also taught philosophy to inmates/prisoners at the Iowa Medical and Classification Center (Oakdale Prison). Even if you do not have a background in philosophy, I believe you will find this book easy to read and profoundly deep in its efforts to address one of the fundamental problems of human existence.

In later reflections, I would like to examine each of the seven ways that we can look at or try to understand pointless or unnecessary suffering, suffering that does not appear to have any teleological or psychologically/spiritually growth-producing outcome. Examples of this kind of suffering are the suffering that comes from forces we identify as evil, the suffering of children, needless suffering, and the suffering of animals. As Samuelson puts it, "The suffering of children sharply illustrates the gap between how the world is and how we think it should be." But first, I would like us to explore something that Samuelson mentions in his introduction. He says,

Roughly speaking, there are two important human responses toward suffering, which I'll call the fix-it and the face-it attitudes.

Samuelson then expands the two options to three when he mentions the "forget-about-it" attitude. I would like to build on Samuelson's outline to suggest that there are actually four important human responses to suffering. The fourth type of response is to face it, to accept it, and then, to the best of our ability, try to fix it.

Let's start with the forget-about-it response to suffering. We could also call this the "flee from the realization of senseless or unnecessary suffering." We considered this option last week when we explored the dynamic of dissociation, the defensive dynamic of "leaving the scene" psychically when what is happening to us or around us is more than we can consciously experience and integrate. Dare we say that this is the most common of all our responses to evil, to pointless or preventable suffering? As the French philosopher Blaise Pascal has suggested, "Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things." What we are basically talking about here is denial.

Samuelson reminds us that in the Hindu epic the Mahabharata, the wise hero Yudhishthira must answer a riddle posed by a divine crane. The riddle is, "Of all the world's wonders, what's the most wonderful?" Yudhishthira answers, "That people, though they see others dying all around them, never believe that they're going to die." With this answer, Yudhishthira has solved the riddle. Once again, as Pascal puts it, "The fact is that the present usually hurts. We thrust it out of sight because it distresses us."

From personal experience, we know the various ways that we flee from facing a reality that we find not only difficult and taxing, but sometimes emotionally unacceptable. We flee from our

troubles through drink or drugs. We fill every moment with noise, with television, with internet exploration, with video games, or with some relatively meaningless ritual. We do this so often, with such regularity, that we no longer recognize it as a defense.

However, this temporary flight into distraction doesn't work in the long run. As Samuelson notes, "ultimately to forget about suffering is to lose our humanity." The comedian Louis C.K. once described an experience he had upon hearing, for the first time, Bruce Springsteen's "Jungleland" on the radio. Louis suddenly realized that instead of trying to flee from his anxiety, trying to escape from it, he should face it and let it wash over him. When he did so, he discovered that the experience was "beautiful!" He realized, as he put it, that "Sadness is poetic! You're lucky to live sad moments! When you let yourself feel sad, your body has antibodies; it has happiness that comes rushing in to meet the sadness." I think (I hope) we have all had this experience, perhaps during grief.

We reluctantly have to admit that it doesn't do any good, at least in the long run, to refuse to face what needs to be faced. It doesn't do any good to flee, to try to suppress or repress what we find painful. This is the basic insight that is utilized by the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) approach in their utilization of various types of exposure experiences to address psychic distress, encouraging and enabling the patient to face into his/her fears rather than flee from them. Depth psychology builds on this dynamic when it teaches that if we simply make the unpleasant symptoms go away, we fail to learn the life lesson that the anxiety or depression would teach us. These two psychotherapeutic approaches, each in its own way, lead us to the second option, the option of "fix it."

Samuelson says that when we adopt the fix-it attitude in response to suffering, "suffering appears as a grievance to be resolved: we'd be better off if we could minimize, even eliminate it." This is our basic approach to everything we find difficult, distasteful, or unpleasant here in the West--let's fix it! This is a problem-solving approach. That's why we invented science and technology; if it's difficult to cross a river, we build a bridge. If we need to make our house cool. If we are diagnosed with cancer, we have the tumor surgically removed, radiated, and/or attacked with chemotherapy. If we don't like the way we look when we get older, there is always Botox or cosmetic surgery.

The problem with this approach is that it is built on an inflated sense of our capabilities. It assumes we can do something that we really can't do. Let's take the example of death. We know that death, for many, is a source of distress, of unpleasant feelings, of existential anxiety. But is it a problem that we can "solve," a state of affairs that we can fix? There is an industry, cryogenics, that (for a hefty price) will deep freeze you while you are still alive, promising to thaw you out and wake you up from your Sleeping Beauty slumber when science and medicine have discovered a cure for whatever ails you, whatever would have brought about your death.

However, aside from Ted Williams' son, who tried to preserve his father's severed head after Ted's death in the hopes of eventually producing another .400 hitter (as if being a .400 hitter, an amazing accomplishment, were totally attributable to what is in one's head), most of us are not excited about this option. I have met with many families who are grieving the loss of a loved one, and not one has asked me what I know about freezing their loved one in the hope that over the next fifty to one hundred years we might find a cure for cancer, heart disease, etc., and bring their loved one back to life (only to die again later of some other cause). Most people, though they don't like it and would probably vote against it if they had the option, accept death as a part of life. In addition, it is daunting to try to imagine the kinds of problems we would have on this earth if, from this point in history on, no one ever died.

I remember thinking about the fix-it philosophy that is all the rage nowadays when I was considering a chaplaincy in a prison (I opted for chaplaincy in a state mental hospital instead.). The fix-it attitude toward the rehabilitation of prisoners, which all of us would like to see happen,

was based on the assumption that all criminals are potentially able to be rehabilitated. When we fail to rehabilitate a sociopathic killer, according to this belief system, it is because we did not utilize the correct approach. We might have offered Freudian therapy when we should have offered Jungian. It is implied that our failure to rehabilitate all prisoners, to empty out our prisons, and to prevent crime, is on our shoulders, and that we should feel guilty for not doing so. We simply need to try harder—or try in different or more enlightened ways.

But what if some people are not able to be rehabilitated? Many years ago, I read a two-volume set entitled *The Criminal Personality* by Samuel Yochelson and Stanton Samenow. The authors stated that they, like many of us, would like to believe that there is a spark of good in everyone. This is the basic stance of humanistic psychology, that everyone is basically good. It is a fundamental tenet of both Christianity and Buddhism. However, the authors state that, despite this core belief, they found individuals within whom they were unable to discern this spark of good, the good that they believed was in the core, the soul of everyone. Was it because they didn't try hard enough or that they didn't utilize the right approach? Or was it because some people are simply evil?

Can everything that we don't like at least potentially be fixed? Can we eliminate all cancer, all heart disease, all illness if we try hard and spend as much money as it would take? Can we eliminate all poverty, all racism, all greed? Can we eliminate crime and mental illness? Can we eradicate the annoying limitations of old age and also death, the ultimate enemy of life? The belief that we can do so was stated quite forthrightly in an early edition of the *Journal of Religion and Health*, where the editor articulated his belief that the cause which this (excellent) journal served was the ultimate elimination of all illness, all disease. When I read this, something in me rose up to question whether this laudable goal was possible, and whether, even if it were possible, it would be a worthwhile goal.

A variation of the "fix-it" approach is the belief, the hope that God will cure our illnesses, that God will miraculously intervene to solve our individual and collective problems. We pray to God to defeat the coronavirus, as if this were something that God wants to do and is able to do. The pastor in Maine, to whom I referred several weeks ago, opined that "instead of trusting in science, we should put our trust in God—who removes all diseases." I don't know why he thinks that God couldn't work through science. We catch ourselves within the grasp of this way of thinking when we wonder (with anger) why God didn't prevent our loved one from dying. God, like an omniscient and omnipotent father, should solve all our problems and take our pain away.

Admittedly, there was a time when, within our own Judeo-Christian tradition, people saw God acting through miraculous interventions, bringing both weal and woe, illness and health, death and life, times of plenty and times of want. By Jesus' time, however, scripture began to witness to a God who was working in the world not only through Jesus but also through people like the disciples. If God was and is working in the world through the risen Christ and through those who are disciples of the Way, whatever spiritual disciples they find meaningful, then God is working in the world through people like you and me. God will probably not miraculously remove the coronavirus from the earth, but God may help us find the strength and the discipline and the empathy and the compassion to respond to it in healthy and helpful ways.

The first of the "Four F's" is flee from it, to forget it. The second is to fix it. The third is to face the fact that there are some problems in life, existential problems, that can neither be fixed nor eliminated. The fourth option, the one I prefer, is to face it, to face the fact that we cannot solve all our problems, all of humanity's problems, but to still do all that we can to fix it. We try to fix it because we have to at least try. We do it because God calls us to do it. We do it because we have no other option if we are to affirm our birthright as co-creators with God of the kingdom of God on earth.

When we turn to scripture, in Matthew 26:6-13 we read Matthew's account of what happened while Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper early in what we now call Holy Week, the week preceding Jesus' death and resurrection. While Jesus is sitting at table with his disciples and Simon, a woman enters the room. She takes a jar of expensive ointment, and pours the ointment on Jesus' head. When the disciples see what the woman is doing, they become incensed at this senseless waste of money. They are puzzled why Jesus would allow the woman to perform such an extravagant gesture when this ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. The disciples' response could probably be classified as an example of the "fix-it" approach to the problem of poverty.

Jesus responds by asking the disciples why they are so angry. He tells them that the woman "has performed a good service for me." He tells them that she has anointed him for his burial. Then comes the troubling verse. Jesus tells his followers, "For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me."

You will always have the poor with you. This implies that, as Jesus saw it, poverty was not an individual or social condition that could be eradicated simply by sharing what we have or by a more enlightened utilization of limited resources. He says that some people will always be poor or sick, no matter what we do. Some people will always be racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, homophobic, greedy, hateful, and evil. There will always be sociopathic individuals, no matter how hard we try to create the ideal conditions for child rearing and the enlightened rehabilitation of those who have gone astray.

If we cannot eradicate poverty and the other types of suffering that we encounter in life, does this mean we should just shrug our shoulders and accept it as a fact of life? If we look at Jesus' life, his ministry, I don't see how we could come to this conclusion. Jesus healed people of various infirmities. He fed the five thousand. He drove out the demons that possessed people, that led them to live their lives off center. He raised Lazarus from the dead.

I think Jesus' response to poverty draws from a teaching from one of the sacred books of his religious tradition, of the Torah, the book of Deuteronomy. I credit Samuelson for making me aware of a very interesting passage in Deuteronomy 15, which sets forth the laws concerning the sabbatical year. In Deuteronomy 15:11, we read,

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

As Jesus said, the poor will always be with us. There will never cease to be someone in need upon the earth. But simply acknowledging this to be the case is not enough. Although we need to "face it," we can't simply accept it as an unalterable fact of life. We need to "open our hand to the poor and needy neighbor in our land."

If Jesus is in our heart, when we encounter the radical poverty that devastates the lives of so many in our country and around the world, we will be touched with empathy; we will be moved with compassion. We will simply *have* to reach out, just as Jesus did, because not to do so would be a denial of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, a presence that leads us to the realization of the deep interconnectedness of all beings, of all sentient life. We have to reach out because Jesus told us that inasmuch as we do it to one of the least of these, his brothers and sisters, *our* brothers and sisters, we do it to him. To be sure, we have to face the fact that some problems are not solvable, not able to be fixed. But, even knowing this, we still have to do everything we can to fix it.

By starting with facing it and then moving to fix it, whatever the "it" is, we are following T. S. Eliot's advice. We are both caring and not caring at the same time. We are responding to suffering, our own and others' suffering, from that still point within us, the part of us that we can experience if we take the time to stop fleeing from everything that distresses us and simply sit

still. I believe that this, the fourth of the Four F's, is the option, the attitude, the response, and the responsibility to which Jesus calls us when we are confronted with the tremendous suffering that presses in upon us in our lives, in our country, and around the world.

When we face things that we are not inclined to face, when we squarely face the realities of life, even those parts of life that are resistant to change, we will discover that something within us arises to meet the challenge. It is as Louis C.K. said: the antibodies of happiness arise within us to counter the sadness we feel. The existentialist writer/philosopher Albert Camus, who wrote *The Plague* (which I still highly recommend) and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (the theme of which is also applicable to our time, to our situation), says it best:

*In the midst of hate, I found there was, within me, an invincible love.
In the midst of tears, I found there was, within me, an invincible smile.
In the midst of chaos, I found there was, within me, an invincible calm.*

*I realized, through it all, that in the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer.
And that makes me happy.*

*For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me,
there's something stronger, something better, pushing right back.*

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. Face what's wrong with our nation and the world, accept it, and then do everything you can to fix it. You are not working alone. Don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul