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Blessings, Everyone!

October 25, 2020

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

#### **Concerns:**

#### **We hold in prayer:**

- Bob L'Heureux, who is recovering from a recent hospitalization in Milford Hospital
- Darlene Sanderson, who is recovering from a fall (dislocated shoulder) and recent hospitalization in Faulkner Hospital
- those who are suffering from the devastating fires in California that have consumed over four million acres, the worst fires in California's history, and also from the fires in Colorado
- those who are suffering from the recent tropical storms/hurricanes and attendant flooding in Louisiana
- those who suffer from the stain on their soul that is called racism or white nationalism or white supremacy
- our country. Pray for our country!! Really!!! It stands in need of good vibrations! Not anger.

#### **Thank you to:**

- Jim Holmes – for faithfully ringing the church bell at 11:00 a.m. every Sunday morning to remind our neighbors and the world that we are still here, and for sending us pictures of the church and church grounds so we remember what they look like
- The unknown person who cleaned up the flower bed by the kitchen door and made it look so nice
- 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

### **Sunday Worship as the Gathered Church**

When it seems reasonable to resume our discussion of the possibility of meeting again for worship in person, we will call a meeting of what will essentially function as an expanded Church Council. Present at this meeting will be the Pastor, the Moderator, the Clerk, the Treasurer, the Collector, our Organist/Choir Director, the members of the Diaconate, the members of the Board of Trustees, and anyone else who would like to attend. If the Covid-19 restrictions are still in place, we may meet in the sanctuary where we can observe safe social distancing, rather than trying to set up a virtual meeting. The Church Council is empowered to act on behalf of the members of the church between annual meetings.

We also need to begin thinking ahead to our Annual Meeting in February. Each board and committee should begin the process of reviewing its budget, especially with an eye to cutting expenses, so we can submit the revised budget to Bob Farmer, who will pull it all together and present it to us at our Annual Meeting this coming February, which we hope we will be able to hold in person. We should be prepared to go through 2021 as we are right now, having our "meetings" online and communicating through email and phone, but we should also be prepared to resume worship and our church life in person to whatever extent state guidelines, denominational (UCC) guidelines, Yankee common sense, and our own philosophy of moving with an abundance of caution and an abundance of care will permit.

#### **Missions:**

Our mission outreach last month, September, was our support of the American Himalayan Foundation's project, Stop Girl Trafficking, which is primarily focused in Nepal. The American Himalayan Foundation provides safety, shelter, education, healthcare, and opportunity to people across the Himalaya who have no one else to whom they can turn, and this particular project reaches out to young girls, who are exceptionally vulnerable.

In the poorer sections of Nepal (of which there are plenty), human traffickers approach the parents of young girls and try to convince the parents that if they will let their daughter go with them, she will receive a good education and a better life for herself. They tell the parents that this is the only way that their daughter can escape a lifetime of poverty. The young girl, of course, is sold into slavery in a child marriage or is used as a sex object, constantly raped by men in that region and around the world who purchase these young girls.

The American Himalayan Foundation goes into these villages to educate parents, to let them know what will *really* happen to their daughters if they let them go with these human traffickers. They encourage parents to send their daughters to school, to give them an education as the best way to help them create a better future for themselves and their families, and they support local schools in their area. There are currently 24,500 young girls who have been helped to continue their education through this program. These are the young woman who will shape the future of Nepal. As the AHF says, "Prevention is rescue without the suffering."

We *strongly* support this mission. The author Jon Krakauer, who is one of my favorite authors, champions this organization and its mission to "Change the Future for Girls at Risk."

We also deplore and are sickened by the evil of human slavery, human trafficking. If there were no demand for young girls to enslave and sexually abuse, there would be no human trafficking. What is wrong with these men??!!

If you feel moved to support the American Himalayan Foundation project Stop Girl Trafficking, you can contact them directly or send a check made out to our church and we will forward it to them.

### **Audio Weekly Worship Service**

We are offering a pre-recorded weekly worship service that I record in my home study. This service can be accessed directly through the home page of our church website: [www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com); it can also be accessed via the audio link of the sermon page. Each service will be listed by date. The reflection/homily will be the reflection that I send 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!

Several people who have already accessed the recorded worship services for September 27, October 4, and October 11, assure us that it is easy to do. Many thanks to David Crane who takes what I send him, puts it in the proper form, and posts it on the website!

### **Quote/Thought of the Day**

*"The flower which is single need not envy the thorns that are numerous."*

Rabindranath Tagore

Tagore (1861-1941), was a Bengali (he was from Calcutta/Kolkata) polymath: poet, writer, composer, philosopher, and painter. He was the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature; he did so for *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings), a collection of poems. His ashes are scattered in the sacred Ganges, which I have seen (and the water of which I would prefer not to drink).

### **A Second Quote/Thought of the Day**

*"If everybody always lied to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer... A people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of the capacity to act, but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people, you can then do what you please."*

The modern philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote this in 1974. We will be returning to her when we reflect on the seven ways of understanding senseless or meaningless suffering.

### **Attention-Grabbling Church Signs**

*"The fact that there's a "Highway to Hell" and only a "Stairway to Heaven" says a lot about anticipated traffic numbers."*

### **Taken From (Apparently Unedited) Church Sunday Morning Bulletins**

*"Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community."*

### **Interesting "Facts"**

*While we are talking about sports (we were talking about sports, weren't we?), can you tell me what lake or lakes are referenced by the name of the newly crowned NBA champion, the Los Angeles Lakers?*

*Answer: There are no lakes in Los Angeles. The team was originally the Minneapolis Lakers; Minnesota is known as the "Land of 10,000 Lakes" (and the home of Land-O-Lakes butter). The Lakers moved to L.A. in 1960; their attendance had dropped off precipitously after the retirement of George Mikan.*

*BTW, George Mikan, (June 18, 1924 – June 1, 2005), nicknamed "Mr. Basketball," is remembered for having played with thick, round spectacles and for being one of the "big men" of his time at 6 ft 10 inches (not very tall nowadays). Mikan is regarded as one of the greatest basketball players of all time, as well as one of the pioneers of professional basketball with his prolific rebounding, shot blocking, and his talent to shoot over smaller defenders with his ambidextrous hook shot. He also utilized the underhanded free-throw shooting technique long before Rick Barry made it his signature shot. He was a member of the first four NBA All-Star games, the first six All-NBA Teams, and was elected to the NBA Hall of Fame. He was so dominant for his day that he prompted several rule changes in the NBA: the introduction of the goaltending rule, the widening of the foul lane (known as the "Mikan Rule,") and the creation of the shot clock. In his later years, Mikan was involved in a long-standing legal battle against the NBA to increase the meager pensions of players who had retired before the league became financially lucrative.*

### **The Pastor's Reflection**

(This reflection will be posted in both a written and an audio form as part of a devotional service on our church website: [www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com))

**Scripture Lessons: Luke 12:13-34**

**Romans 12:9-21**

The matter of seeing, of being able to see is a big deal. We need to see clearly, to see with both eyes (and perhaps also the mystical “third eye,” the eye to the Divine). The ability to integrate the functioning of both eyes enable us to experience depth perception and focus. We need to see things clearly when they are up close, and we also need to be able to see things at a distance. We want to be able to connect with life “as far as the eye can see.”

As I mentioned in my last missive, this matter has taken on a certain degree of importance for me in light (no pun intended) of my recent cataract surgery. Now that light is able to enter my eye relatively unimpeded, I can see better. I will still need to utilize reading glasses, but I may not require distance glasses. If I were preaching this as a sermon in our church right now, I might be tempted to break into one of the many songs about seeing, e.g., “I Can See Clearly Now, the Rain is Gone.” Preachers, as you know, enjoy the benefits of a captive audience, one that not only has to listen, but also is supposed to be polite and reserved in its response; it is not like this all the time in night clubs (not that I spend a lot of time singing in or even frequenting night clubs). It is also comforting to know that if I found myself inclined to break into song during a service of worship, Michael would immediately begin playing accompaniment on the organ or our new piano—and he would be doing it in the key in which I was singing. I don’t know how he does this (I suspect that inborn talent and years of practice may have something to do with it).

I guess this proves a point I made in my last reflection, that I am always preaching to myself. If a particular sermon or reflection happens to fit you, happens to address an area of concern in your life in a helpful way, so much the better. I assure you, everything I say applies to me. At my best, I remember that whenever we point a finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing right back at us. There is also one that is pointing up in the air, but that’s not the point (unless it’s pointing at God as a reminder not to point fingers). Once again, this proves it; there are limitations to every metaphor.

Two weeks ago, in my reflection on the different ways of seeing, and also the different ways that we can dwell in darkness, I noted that a single maple leaf can cover the moon, can block our sight of the moon, if we hold the leaf close enough to our eyes. We can do this even though the moon, the fifth largest satellite in our solar system, has a mean diameter of 2,159.2 miles, which is approximately a third of the diameter of earth. BTW, the average orbital distance of the moon to earth is 238,856 miles, which means that it is 1.28 light-seconds away. But that’s not the point. The point is that the moon is very big, but we can blot it out from our vision by the judicious (or injudicious) placing of a single maple leaf.

When I used the example of a maple leaf in my reflection, I was aware that I had heard it somewhere before; I had not made it up on my own. Sure enough, just a few days later, I ran across what was probably the source I had failed to reference. Shundo Aoyama, a modern Zen master, in her book *Zen Seeds*, says,

*Hideo Kobayashi, a cultural critic, says that a leaf from a tree can hide the moon. If we place the leaf over our eyes, it is so close that we cannot see it as it is. A leaf over our eyes can shut out the moon and the world around us, too.*

Then Aoyama goes on to say,

*If we hold the leaf away from us, however, we can see the leaf as it is. So it is with other things. Mountains, rivers, the moon, clouds—all are visible if we remove the leaf from our eyes.*

*When it comes to things in our own lives, they can be too close to be seen in a proper perspective. We easily get caught up in situations, carried away, eventually losing our perspective. We can be easily puffed up with pride over a trifle or become prey to melancholy. But if we see things in perspective, we can appreciate the wonderful scenery around us.*

I want to make two points about this. First, I don't always reference the source of what I write or say, even when the idea or example was consciously or unconsciously borrowed from someone whose writings I had encountered in the near or distant past. I just want you to know this. It would be cumbersome to constantly site my sources in a sermon or an informal reflection like this. I also don't do it because, with almost everything I say, I got it somewhere. I don't think of myself as a particularly creative person; I don't come up with new ideas, new ways of looking at something, which may be why I am not inclined to write books. However, I have learned that there are different kinds of creativity, different ways to be creative. Though I don't come up with new ideas, what I think I do fairly well is to take time-honored truths from the fields of science, philosophy, the Christian faith, world religions, spiritual disciplines/paths, and psychology, particularly Jungian psychology, and apply them creatively to my life and other people's lives in ways that are at least potentially helpful.

The second point is that, by fortuitously stumbling across the reference that I had read some time ago, the quote from Hideo Kobayashi, I realized that Shundo Aoyama gave me just what I was seeking to clarify what it was that I wanted to say in this reflection. There are two ways of looking at the leaf. Aoyama articulates both. And it is to the second that we now turn.

Last week we saw how a single leaf, if held close to the eyes, can block our vision. This is true. I think I used the example of a maple leaf because we have a beautiful Japanese Maple in our back yard. A single leaf from this tree can prevent us from seeing the world when we hold it so close to our eyes that we can't see past it. As I said, a single leaf can block our vision of the moon.

I don't want to spend too much time on the metaphor of the moon, but I recall that we discussed the prominent place that the moon seems to hold in the writings of Christian mystics like the Jesuit, Anthony de Mello, whose books we were reading in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group before we stopped meeting because of this dumb virus, and also Taoist and Buddhist teachers. The moon, with its soft, feminine light seems to have been used by mystics and poets throughout history as a symbol of enlightenment, of peace. Masahide, a seventeenth-century Japanese poet and samurai who practiced medicine and studied under the Zen poet Matsuo Basho, wrote,

*Barn's burnt down*

*Now*

*I can see the moon.*

I seem to recall that Jesus addressed the matter of how our possessions, especially when we are attached to them, can block our vision of the kingdom of God and also our experience of it.

The following story is told of Ryokan (1753-1831), my favorite Japanese Zen master and poet. Ryokan, whose name means "Great Fool," after experiencing enlightenment, eschewed the traditional path of founding a school and teaching aspirants, to withdraw into the mountains, living a life of solitude, as the Ch'an masters did of old.

*One day, when Ryokan was out walking in the mountains, a burglar entered his humble hut to steal whatever he could. However, he soon discovered that there was nothing there to steal. Returning to his hut, Ryokan encountered the thief. "You have obviously come a long way to visit me," Ryokan said, "and it would not be right to have you leave empty-handed. Here, take my clothes." The thief, confused, took the clothes and slunk away.*

*Ryokan sat naked in meditation looking out the window. "Poor fellow," he said. "I wish I could give him this beautiful moon."*

How empty—material possessions, especially when compared with the beautiful moon! Ryokan also wrote the following:

*At night, deep in the mountains,  
I sit in meditation.  
The affairs of men never reach here.  
Everything is quiet and empty.  
All the incense has been swallowed up by the endless night.  
My robe has become a garment of dew.  
Unable to sleep I walk out into the woods—  
Suddenly, above the highest peak,  
the full moon appears.*

You see—the moon again! Dogen, the Soto Zen master, wrote,

*Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in one dewdrop on the grass.*

I find this comforting; it implies that even with our small minds, which are like a puddle an inch wide, we can still grasp the big, the ultimate vision, the ultimate truth.

In this reflection, I would like us to focus not on the moon, but on the leaf. Note that this is the second point that Shundo Aoyama made in his comment on the leaf. When we hold “the leaf” too close, it not only blocks our vision of the moon, the symbol/experience of enlightenment, it also blocks our vision of the leaf. We see neither clearly.

When it comes to that which we hold dear, and this includes our religious and political beliefs/values, if we hold them too close, if we hold them too tightly, we will not be able to see them clearly. In order to see something clearly, to focus on it, we need to hold it at a certain distance. If we hold a maple leaf at arm’s length, we can look carefully at it. We can put it in perspective. We can turn it over and over, looking at it from all sides. We can take in its color, which is a striking maroon/wine/red. We can focus on its shape, how it differs from the shape of an oak leaf. We can look carefully at its intricate pattern of veins. The leaf is beautiful in itself! At this time of year, the chlorophyll in this leaf breaks down and the underlying pigments show themselves in all their resplendent glory. We see the beautiful results of photosynthesis in our little leaf.

Our little leaf is so beautiful, so intricate, so amazing! When we look carefully at it, we sense that we are seeing into one of the great mysteries of life. As William Blake said,

*To see a World in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wildflower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.*

Or as Rilke said,

*Children, one earthly Thing truly experienced, even once, is enough for a lifetime.*

This is what Siddhartha realized through his relationship with Vasudeva—that the secret of life, the impermanence and interconnectedness of all life which Vasudeva experienced in the depths of the ever-flowing river, could also be seen in a cloud, a flower, an insect. If only we look deeply.

Think of a window. When we are inside our house and look at one of the windows, we see the window. We may note whether it is clean or in need of cleaning. We may note the number of panes of glass. If it is dark outside, which happens earlier in the afternoon this time of year, the window acts like a mirror. We can see ourself in the window. However, if we look even more carefully, we can see through the window to what is outside the window, what is outside the “home” that we inhabit. We can see life, nirvana, the kingdom of heaven—that which is right outside our dwelling (and also inside).

Holding things too close to us, which is what we tend to do, especially with things that are dear to us, is called grasping or clinging in our spiritual traditions. Recall the barrier to enlightenment, to the kingdom of heaven, that was experienced by the rich young man. Our attachment to material possessions causes suffering; it causes suffering to others since we find it difficult to share out of the abundance and joy of a compassionate and loving heart, and it also causes suffering to us. We can actually lose our soul. In the Parable of the Rich Fool, as recorded in the Gospel According to Luke (NRSV), we read,

*Then he [Jesus] told them a parable:*

*“The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”*

*But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life [your soul] is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”*

BTW, those people who maintain that their sybarite philosophy of life, their commitment to “eat, drink, and be merry” is taken from the Bible, are taking this phrase out of context. I know it is prudent to store up food, toilet paper, and disinfectants during this pandemic. I would add that setting aside a few bottles of single malt scotch is also not outside the realm of sagacious foresight, especially with a long dark winter ahead. Some people are apparently also storing up guns and ammunition in preparation for the coming apocalypse. This reminds me of the fall-out shelters that people used to build in their homes in the 1960’s. However, as Christians, as compassionate human beings, we should remember to share what we have with those who are less fortunate than we, those who have so much less.

You may have sensed that I am unabashedly reminding us of these time-honored spiritual truths just before our annual stewardship appeal to support our church with our time, talent, and treasure, specifically through our pledge to the General Fund, the operating budget of our church. Stewardship, the stewardship of our possessions, of our wealth, is indeed a spiritual, a moral matter. But that is not the point. The point is that there are other types of grasping, other types of attachment that are even more damaging to our souls and to the well-being of our brothers and sisters than our not inconsiderable attachment to our material possessions.

The Buddha once said that it is difficult for us to let go of that to which we are attached, even when our attachment gives rise to suffering in ourselves and others. Then he said something interesting. He said that the most difficult type of attachment to abandon, to let go, is our attachment to our religious beliefs. To this, from a cursory glance at our country and around the world, I would add our political beliefs/preferences/convictions.

Our religious and political beliefs are particularly difficult to dislodge because we generally don’t allow them to be challenged. We don’t tend to challenge them ourselves, and we don’t allow other people, other viewpoints, to intrude in such a way that we might be forced to revise or change our ideas. This is especially true of our religious beliefs, which we hold to

be divinely inspired, to be “gospel.” We are taught that if we have faith, we will not waver from our beliefs, no matter how absurd they may seem to the modern, enlightened eye and intellect. Our cherished beliefs can become a barrier to spiritual growth. As Goethe said,

*Thinking is more interesting than knowing, but less interesting than seeing.*

Goethe seems to be saying that seeing is the most interesting, the most important of the three; then comes thinking, then comes knowing. This is because when we know something, when we really *know* something to be true, we stop thinking about it. We already have the truth; why should we look at life/God from other perspectives, from other viewpoints? What we have is dogma. Even thinking, with its over-reliance on cognition, on conceptual thinking, on analysis rather than synthesis, can block us from seeing, from seeing things as they are, from seeing through the fresh eye of a curious, inquisitive child. And seeing, according to Goethe, is the most important way that we have of connecting with the world, the most important way of experiencing. As the Jesuit scientist/theologian Teilhard de Chardin has said,

*The whole of life lies in the verb seeing.*

Let’s overlook, for a moment, what an English teacher in our midst would be quick to point out--that “seeing” is not really a verb; it is a gerund, a form of a verb ending in “ing” that acts as a noun (I think). Teilhard probably meant just the verb “see.” Jesus says, “Look.” He says, “See.” I know I am getting a little defensive of my buddy, Teilhard, but I really like the way he brings science, psychology, and theology together, e.g., when it comes to his thinking about complexity and the creation/evolution of life. The Roman Catholic Church, however, was not particularly thrilled by this original, creative thinker; in the best tradition of Galileo and other scientists, they silenced him for his “heretical” teaching. It was always thus. And it is much too often thus with us and our beliefs, with the way we respond to those who disagree with us, whom we judge to be modern heretics.

We need to find a new, a better way to engage in dialogue with other religions, and we need to find a new, a better, a more constructive way to engage in our national political dialogue. We are much too polarized. We see “the other” as our enemy and the enemy of America, of our way of life, or of an enlightened way of life for all our people. William Butler Yeats, the Irish poet, wrote *The Second Coming* in 1919, shortly after the end of World War I. The poem begins,

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. Sound familiar?

We have worked hard (at least some of us have) to understand different religions as different ways of seeing. Far too often, “knowing” gets in the way. It gets in the way of seeing, listening, thinking, learning, and growing. We need to bring this way of thinking to our political discourse if everything is not to devolve into a power play. Here, again, the metaphor we use shapes our response. Do we need to “do battle” with those whose political views differ from ours? Or do we have to find a better way to frame our interaction, our dialogue?

If we can find a way to do this, to engage in respectful, constructive dialogue, we will find that it helps us negotiate the many bifurcated categories that bedevil our society (and us as

individuals): Catholic-Protestant, Christian-Jew, Muslim-Infidel, Republican-Democrat, capitalist-socialist, White-Black, heterosexual-homosexual, etc. When our consciousness divides complexity into pairs of opposites, it invariably assigns a positive value to one and a negative value to the other. This psychological dynamic has probably led to more suffering than any other issue in the history of humankind (I use the word “kind” loosely).

Jesus provides us, perhaps not with an “answer” but with a way of thinking, with a way of seeing. As recorded in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, he tells us,

*You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?*

Jesus even prayed for those who nailed him to the cross. The apostle Paul, in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of his letter to the church at Rome, tells us,

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. . . No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.*

How can we overcome the polarization in our national dialogue? This is a real challenge, and I am speaking both to and of myself here. Most of the time, I have absolutely no desire to listen to or dialogue with people on the other end of the political spectrum. And yet, I know where this way of thinking leads. It assumes one of us is right (me) and one of us is wrong (you). And why should I listen to or even try to understand someone who is wrong?

Perhaps we could start by avoiding the terms right and wrong. We could start such a dialogue, which we could at least do in our imagination, by saying, “Let me try to understand what you are saying and why you feel the way you do.” Then we could probably better understand why the other person feels the way he/she does. Then, instead of calling the person a knucklehead, a dolt, a twit, a dunderhead, accusing him/her of having the brains of a turnip or a hedgehog (you will please forgive me as a pastor for my use of expletives here, but these people rouse my ire), we could say, “I see what you’re saying and why you feel the way you do, but I see it differently.” We could start with an affirmation rather than a polarizing cuss word or two. The other may or may not be willing to listen, to try to understand what we believe, why we see things the way we do, but this doesn’t matter. At least we are not being drawn into the kind of polarization that leads to violence.

I am unable to believe that if we are not outraged, if we don’t hate the “enemy,” we simply don’t “get the point.” I have a colleague who recently posted on Facebook that we have to learn how to dialogue with those on “the other side of the aisle.” He was vilified, not by those on the right (he is roughly where I am on the political spectrum—significantly left of center), but by people on the far left. Apparently, if we don’t destroy statues, burn down police stations, etc., we don’t “get it,” we are not “woke.” It reminded me of Cobra-Kai, the rival (bad, unenlightened) dojo in the movie, *The Karate Kid*, where the sensei’s mantra was “There is no fear in this dojo! There is no mercy in this dojo!” Is this what we want our Senate and House of

Representatives to look like? We should also note that a dojo is supposed to be a place of enlightenment.

This polarizing, bifurcating way of thinking and relating with those whose views differ from ours isn't what I learned when I participated in the March from Selma to Montgomery. It is not John Lewis's way or Martin Luther King's way. It is not the way that Jesus lived and taught. The answer to fear and rage is not an equal or even higher level of fear and rage. We should not fight fire with fire (which is a strange, counter-intuitive guideline), but with water. We need to try something different, because what we are doing isn't working. If we don't embrace a new, a different, a more respectful and humane and caring way of communicating our deepest values, our national dialogue will devolve into a power struggle, which seems to be the way it is headed. If this happens, we may win the battle, but lose the war for the soul of our nation.

We need to build bridges, not only with the poor and dispossessed, but also with those who have dispossessed them, those whom we identify as the cause of the problem. I know; this is really difficult to imagine, let alone to do. This is an obvious case of my preaching to myself. However, I do know what Jesus said, that the answer to hatred is not hatred. The answer to the abuse of power is not the abuse of power in the service of another ideology. If we listen, try to understand, and the other refuses to listen, refuses to try to understand, do we really lose? We still get our vote. We still have our values. But we gain nothing if we drop down to a lower level of consciousness, the collective level of consciousness that feeds fascism, totalitarianism, and the silencing of individual consciousness, individual freedom, individual responsibility.

I have a hunch that after this upcoming election, our nation will need a lot of healing. I also believe that this will take time. We will have to commit ourselves to this healing process in whatever ways we can. I don't know exactly how we can do this, but I do know that holding our beliefs so closely, so tightly that we can't see the other person objectively and compassionately, so close that we can't even see our own beliefs objectively and look at them critically, is like holding a maple leaf very close to our eyes. When we do this, it blocks our vision of both the leaf and also the moon.

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. Remove the log from your own eye that you might see your neighbor more clearly, that you might actually be able to help your neighbor remove the speck from his/her eye. Don't be so darned judgmental; it doesn't help anyone, even you. Restore the health to your third eye, your spiritual eye, to your way of seeing. Don't descend into darkness. Always be ready to question, to learn, to grow, to look at your own beliefs critically. Above all, don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul