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Blessings, Everyone!

November 8, 2020

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

#### **Concerns:**

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

- Our country. Pray for America. It stands in need of prayers for healing and a new, more inclusive, more enlightened vision of who we are.

- Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, our President and Vice-President Elect

#### **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 (Karin Farmer?) who cleaned up the flower bed by the kitchen door and the other flower beds and made them look so nice

- Bob Farmer and Bill Guenon for singlehandedly (doublehandedly?) doing the bottle drive at the transfer station, traditionally one of the big fund raisers for our church

- 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**

Something to keep in mind as we consider meeting again for worship. A recent coronavirus outbreak has been traced to Crossroads Community Church in Fitchburg, reminding us that churches across the country have emerged as a major source of coronavirus infections. Crossroads Community, a popular Pentecostal church, is responsible for over 150 cases, with one of its worshippers presently hooked to a ventilator in the intensive care unit at Heywood Hospital with COVID-19 pneumonia and an extremely low oxygen level.

The lead pastor of the church, Bryan Tomes, when informed of the number of parishioners who had been sickened by the outbreak, said, "We believe that we will not be overcome but will come out on the other side victorious in the Mighty Name of Jesus." In a video posted March 31 on the church's Facebook page, Tomes, unmasked and seated closely with nine unmasked members of the Crossroads staff, accused the media of "fear-mongering" about the virus. He then told worshippers that if they apply oil over the doorposts of their homes, God would "honor our action" and the "Angel of Death will go right over it."

I confess that I have been unable to determine whether Pastor Tomes believes we should use regular motor oil, chainsaw oil, or Wesson cooking oil over our doorposts.

I will resist the temptation to comment on Pastor Tomes' theology. However, it makes me sad when, in response to social problems, and we have many, the church becomes part of the problem, not part of the solution.

### **Missions:**

Our mission outreach for the month of November is World Vision. The following is a letter sent to us from Edgar Sandoval, Sr., President:

"Dear Pastor,

Jesus' call to care for strangers comes to mind (Matthew 25:35) each time I hear about the growing refugee crisis in our world. And my heart breaks for children who must flee their homes for safety and shelter.

In Bangladesh right now, there are 925,000 Rohingya refugees. They were driven from Myanmar by violent persecution. . .

Pastor, your emergency support right now is critical to help save refugee children around the world. Thanks to government grants, your church's loving gift of \$500, \$300, or any amount multiplies 5X in impact to provide emergency food, health care, and life-saving aid wherever refugees need it most.

Please prayerfully consider a donation today. You'll send emergency aid to help children and families who lost everything and now face daily challenges for survival."

If you feel moved to support World Vision, you can contact them directly or send a check made out to our church and we will forward it to them as part of our mission offering.

### **Audio Weekly Worship Service**

We are offering a weekly worship service that I record and post on the home page of our church website: [www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com); it is in the audio section of the sermon section. Each service is listed by date. The reflection/homily is the reflection that I send to all of you 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 contact list. My reflection is also accessible in printed form on our website in the sermon section.

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. We just need to be patient. For the time being, many thanks to David who takes the audio recording that I send him through email, puts it in the proper form, edits the sound, and posts it on the website!

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

*"We were made for joy and woe  
Then when this we rightly know  
Through the world we safely go.  
Joy and woe are woven fine  
A clothing for the soul to bind."*

William Blake

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

*"Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire."*

Catherine of Siena

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

*Just Love Everyone*

*I'll Sort Them Out Later. - God*

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

*“Smile at someone who is hard to love. Say “Hell” to someone who doesn’t care much about you.”*

### **Interesting “Facts”**

Jeff Jacoby, with whom I often (almost always) disagree, wrote the following in last week’s Boston Sunday Globe:

“A bitterly divided nation. An electoral campaign full of insults and defamation. Dread, in both camps, of the reign of terror to come if the opposing camp wins. Speculation that the president might not leave peacefully if he loses the election. Threats of violence. A growing sense that Americans, blinded by ideological enmity, could be headed toward a kind of civil war.

“Truly, politics in 2020 are toxic. But the description you just read is of politics in 1800.

“The election that year and its immediate aftermath was a terrible time in the United States, a period of vicious political conflict and personal loathing. After a poisonous campaign, President John Adams, a Federalist, lost his bid for reelection to Thomas Jefferson, a Democratic-Republican. Federalists were enraged at the prospect of losing the White House. Some of them schemed to block Jefferson’s inauguration. Jefferson’s allies prepared to mobilize militias and force the Federalists to leave.

“When he took the oath of office, Jefferson’s first priority was not to condemn his predecessor’s policies or to revel in his own party’s ascendancy. It was to cool the passions inflaming American society and begin the world of national reconciliation. . .

“He implored Americans to stop letting politics divide them into warring camps. . .

“Taking the helm of a nation riven by partisan discord, Jefferson called for healing.”

Jacoby, in his commentary, pointed out that several other presidents have followed Jefferson’s example, notably James Monroe, Abraham Lincoln, and Gerald Ford. He ends by quoting Jefferson, who said, “Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.” We need politicians who embrace that point of view. But it would be even better if we started the process with ourselves.

### **The Pastor’s Reflection**

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

**Scripture Lessons:** Matthew 5:1-16, 38-48

Well, this has certainly been an interesting week! And it ended with a 3.6 earthquake this morning (Sunday morning) that we heard distinctly but didn’t actually feel in Foxborough! (I wonder what that means?! Is the world coming to an end? Or is hope finally emerging from Pandora’s box?)

Perhaps the election turned out the way you wanted. Perhaps it didn’t. But I think we can all agree on one thing, and we don’t seem to be doing a very good job of agreeing on anything right now (except that we are coming to like Cam Newton): we have certainly learned a lot about America and Americans, specifically what we believe and what kind of values inform our votes.

It has been a week of intense feelings for many of us as the election and the tabulation of votes in six or seven key states played itself out, as we stayed glued to either CNN or Fox News. For those of us who had voted for Joe Biden: anxiety, despair, depression, dread, and disillusionment over the possibility that America might truly lose its soul. Then, after the result was announced: relief, elation, joy, and hope. For those of us who had voted for Donald Trump: anxiety, despair, depression, dread, and disillusionment over the possibility that America might truly lose its soul, and the same set of feelings following the defeat of their candidate--but for an entirely different set of reasons, an entirely different set of fears.

No matter where we come down on the political spectrum, it has become clear that we are the United States of America in name only. In reality, there are two Americas. We are a divided nation. Even though Joe Biden won the popular vote with 75 million votes, more votes than any candidate for the presidency has ever received, over 67 million Americans voted for Donald Trump. Trump received 4 million more votes than he did in the 2016 election. For those of us who voted for Joe Biden, those who, like me, are left of center politically, this is a sobering realization. For Blacks and other minorities, this is not a sobering realization; they realized long ago that there are two Americas. But for those of us who are in the ruling class or caste, this is or should be a sobering realization.

I confess that I still don't understand the thinking of those who have not only remained loyal to Donald Trump but have become even more fervent in their support of him over the past four years. I kept thinking that somewhere along the line, something should have registered in their consciousness as a deal-breaker. I am thinking in particular of white Evangelical Christians who went 80-20 for Trump. With a few notable exceptions, white Evangelical Christians either accepted or overlooked or discredited descriptions of his character and reports of activities that I believe should have given them pause. There should have been a line somewhere: "I will go this far with this man and his way of thinking but no farther." But the red line in the sand kept being erased by the tide of lies (over 27,000 documented over 4 years), misinformation, and the naïve belief in various conspiracy theories, e.g., the belief that Trump and Trump alone can save America from the pedophile Democrats who kidnap and sexually abuse little children (think of Pizzagate). Because I can't understand this kind of blind loyalty in a democratic country like ours, I find myself somewhere short of joy at being on the "winning side." I think we have a lot of work to do as a nation if we are to overcome the forces that divide us, if we are to experience healing and reconciliation, if we are to become "one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Darlene and I listened to Vice-President-Elect Kamala Harris and President-Elect Joe Biden's speeches last night, and we agreed with absolutely everything they said. They held forth a vision of hope and possibility for America, for all Americans; they called us to be the America we can and should become. Biden, calling us to true greatness, reminded us that we Americans can do anything we want—as long as we work together for the common good. Ah, but here's the catch—we need to *work together*. Right now, that prospect, to which Joe Biden is fully committed, seems to be grounded more in hope than an accurate assessment of the current and future probable state of affairs. Then again, as you know, there's nothing wrong with hope! I believe in miracles!

Our country stands in need of healing in many different ways. It stands in need of a reconciliation based on justice and acceptance between many different groups or types of people. I believe this with all my heart, and I will work as hard as I can to help make this happen. I want healing to take place, but not at any price.

A commentator on Fox News this past Friday expressed his opinion that even if Biden won the election, the vote was not indicative of what could be called a mandate. I'm not sure how many popular or electoral votes one needs to receive a mandate, but was clear that the

commentator was afraid that the crazy leftists would feel they have a mandate to turn us into a communist state, to take our guns away, to socialize our health care system, to undermine the Christian church, and to destroy the capitalistic economic system that has worked so well for so many (actually, especially well for a select few). I beg to differ on the matter of a mandate, however. I believe the record number of people who voted in this election were expressing their basic values, and the basic values of the two camps or political parties apparently differ. I believe the voters were delivering a mandate to the incoming administration, to the new Congress, and to the American people.

When we share a common value and goal, we can respectfully disagree about what is the best path to achieve the desired end. If we want to keep America safe, we can disagree about whether the construction of a wall between us and Mexico is the best way to achieve this end. If we want to improve our economy, we can disagree about whether protectionism and tariffs are the best way to make this happen. We can disagree about whether it is better to raise taxes to provide more and better services to our people, or whether we should cut taxes and increase the national debt. We can disagree about whether we prefer big government or small government, whether we want power to basically reside in the federal government or individual states. If we want to avoid the devastating effects of climate change, we can disagree about whether a carbon tax is or is not a good way to combat global warming. If we want the best possible education for our children, we can disagree about whether public schools or private charter schools are the best way to accomplish this goal. We can share our ideas openly with each other, listen respectfully, and then work toward a consensus, just as we do in our church.

But what do we do when we really don't want the same things for America? When we do not share the same vision of the kind of country that we feel we are called to be?

Take the Civil Rights Movement for example. There were two visions of America both in Abraham Lincoln's time and in Lyndon Johnson's. One envisioned an America where Black people were free, where they had equal rights to education and health care, where they could vote and hold office, where slavery was abolished, and where the Christian church would take a stand against racism. The other vision was of an America where black people would remain slaves, where they were treated like animals to be bought and sold, where they were treated not as human beings but as things. The problem was how to reconcile these two divergent views.

The answer: we couldn't. That's why we had to live through the heartbreak of a Civil War. That's why the majority of people/states in our country voted to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1960's, whether some people/states liked it or not. Not everyone in our country liked this movement forward toward civil rights, toward equality, this change in our American culture. Some strongly resisted it.

I think of Jim Clark, the sheriff of Dallas County at the time of the March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, a man whom I met briefly when I was jailed in Selma for "parading without a permit." Sheriff Clark wore a button on his military style uniform emblazoned with the word "NEVER!" (referring, of course, to integration). He carried a cattle prod in addition to his pistol and police baton. Jim Clark died at age 84 still firmly entrenched in his belief that he was right in his opposition to integration and his support of "Southern culture." I find this sad. But it was clear that when it came right down to it, the two differing visions of America could not be reconciled. We had to decide what kind of America we wanted to be, what kind of America we wanted to become.

I hope, I pray for healing in America. However, if this "healing" comes at the expense or compromise of our basic values, the abandonment of our Christian values, then it is not worth it. As we move forward, I believe we need to work together in the pursuit of the following basic human values:

- Equal rights for all people, including LGBTQ people
- A commitment to end homophobia, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia
- True equality/sovereignty for women, including their reproductive “rights”
- A commitment to end misogyny, to break the power of the patriarchy in its many forms
- A desire to identify systemic as well as personal racism and a commitment to end it
- The protection of our environment, a commitment to pay whatever price needs to be paid to stop global warming
- A commitment to provide our children with clean air and water
- Affordable high quality health care for all
- Access to high quality education for all, including higher education for those who, under the present system, are unable to afford it
- A commitment to combat the soul-crushing effects of income inequality and poverty
- Viewing ourselves as part of the world community and an affirmation of the important and constructive role we can play in world affairs
- A democratic system that cannot be bought by corporations, a government of the people, by the people, and for all the people
- A secure retirement, economic social security and health care for all our senior citizens

We need a president, an administration, and a Congress that are committed to these basic values/ideals. I believe that Joe Biden and Kamala Harris are committed to these ends, which is why I voted for them. I hope and pray that they will be able to unite all Americans in the pursuit of these goals. If we work together, we can do it!

When we are going through a difficult time, which our nation and the world presently are, the predominant emotion that we feel is fear. I sense a great deal of fear in our country, a layer of fear that is experienced by people of both/all political persuasions. I remember what Franklin D. Roosevelt said when I was quite young: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” I hesitate to disagree with someone who played an important role in the resolution of World War II and who was a social visionary, but I would put it differently: “The only thing we have to fear is our reaction to fear. An unenlightened reaction can cause more problems, more suffering than whatever it was that we feared.”

As a world, as a nation, and as individuals, when we are going through a difficult time, when we are going through a wilderness experience, our response basically falls along the two ends of the spectrum. We unconsciously “choose” one of two options; our choices are framed by two different visions. The first option is a paranoid vision; it calls us to pull back, to hunker down, to take care of ourselves, to try to turn the clock/calendar back to when (we believe) things were better. The other is a hopeful vision; it calls us to move forward into a new world, a new way of living and being. The first embraces simplification; the second embraces complexity. The first is tribal, e.g., we identify with the dominant values and mores of our nation, our race, our political party, our family, our religion. The second embraces community, diversity, multiculturalism, and a sense that we are part of a larger world, the human race. I think you know which of these I prefer.

I think back to the 1960’s and 1970’s. At that time, we were all somewhere between concerned and fearful about the feared inevitability of a nuclear holocaust, an all-out war between us and the Soviet Union. We knew that if both countries unleashed the full power of their nuclear armaments, the whole world would be covered with several inches of radioactive dust, that all life as we know it on earth would end, except, perhaps for cockroaches, who seem to have a knack for surviving almost anything.

I remember that when people built new houses during this period, they often asked their contractor to alter the shape of the foundation to add a fallout shelter. This underground

bunker, secured by a solid metal door, would be stocked with food and water, beds and chairs, a portable toilet, some way to cook the food, and a rifle and ammunition to protect our family against the intrusion of neighbors who had not prepared for the apocalypse and came knocking on our door. I knew people who did this, and I know someone whose fallout shelter is still stocked with supplies. I never understood how we could ensure fresh air within the fallout shelter when the air outside was highly radioactive. But the building of fallout shelters, as I recall, was “all the rage” at the time.

At the time, however, some people dissented; they argued against this option. They did not see hunkering down, taking care of ourselves/our family alone, as the most creative response to a potential world crisis, a crisis that we had created. They did not want us to prepare for the inevitable when the outcome we feared was not inevitable. They suggested that we sit down with the leaders of the Soviet Union to see if we could work out our differences in a way that did not lead to nuclear war. They hoped that reasonable people would be able to see that mutually assured destruction was not a desirable end to international conflict. They told us building a fallout shelter in our home, because it created a sense of false security, undermined our determination to do what we really needed to do to resolve the crisis.

One option was to move backward, to hunker down, to ensure our personal survival. The other was to move forward, to make us vulnerable enough to try something bold and creative like dialoguing with our sworn enemy. I saw these as two different visions of how we habitually respond to a crisis. Fortunately, we continue to move slowly toward multi-national nuclear disarmament. I believe we made the right choice in this. Building fallout shelters is not the solution.

If we look around the world, the option of moving forward into complexity and diversity is not a popular one. The tendency seems to be toward increasing entrenchment into tribalism in its many forms: the caste system as it exists in so many countries (including ours), the patriarchy, racism, white supremacy/white nationalism, populism, and the emergence of dictators who promise to lead us backward into a golden era that was golden only for a few. It was this way in Jesus' time as well.

Think of King Herod's response when he learned of the prophesized birth of the Christ child. Instead of moving forward into this world-changing event, he became even more entrenched in his attachment to power. He ordered his soldiers to kill all the children of Jewish parents under the age of two, the so-called “slaughter of the innocents.” The wise men were examples of people who moved forward toward the event and the new age that was emerging. T. S. Eliot, in his poem “Journey of the Magi,” hints at how the wise men were changed by their experience of the little child in a manger.

The vision that so many of us share in relation to America and the world is, admittedly, a counter-cultural vision. This is why I was heartened that so many of us voted for it in this election, that we moved toward the empowerment of the people through making it possible for everyone to vote rather than moving toward handing over more and more power to a dictator. Our choice, our vision, admittedly involves vulnerability. It demands that we listen and try to understand those who embrace differing political or religious views. It demands that we try to work together for the common good. But we will never achieve true reconciliation if we abandon those values which we believe are informed by our Christian faith. I am not a big fan of the saying “peace at any price.” As a psychologist, I have seen far too many people, especially women, who have been badly hurt through their allegiance to this catchphrase. There will be times in our lives when the price of peace will be too great. If we compromise our basic values, the price is more than we should pay.

As we move forward into the future as a nation and a world, let us reaffirm the basic values that were both taught and lived by Jesus. The Beatitudes are an articulation of these basic counter-cultural values. Our Christian values are counter-cultural values; they often run counter to our culture and they often even run counter to the values of the institutional church. This was the message of the Protestant Reformation, that the Christian church stands in constant need of reform, that it needs to move forward into a future that is envisioned and guided by the Holy Spirit. I believe this is true of our nation, of our culture as well.

God grant that we can bring this message, a message that helps us overcome fear and tribalism, a commitment to the bigger vision, the Christian vision, the vision and message of Jesus to our nation and to the world.

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. Remember that the rituals, the religious celebrations that are denied to us as a community of faith during this period of pandemic restrictions are still alive and powerful, and that they carry their message of healing within our hearts. Remain committed to the bigger, more enlightened vision of who we are and who we can become as individuals and as a nation. Above all, don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul