

The First Community Church of Southborough
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*O God, make the door of this house
wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship,
but narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride, and strife.*

*Make its threshold
smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children,
nor to straying feet,
but rugged and strong enough to turn back the Tempter's power.*

*God, make the door of this house
the gateway to Thine eternal kingdom.*

November 15, 2020

Blessings, Everyone!

Keeping in Touch With Our Church Family

Concerns:

We hold in prayer:

- Our country. We stand in need of prayer 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, and their new administration
- Those who have become estranged from members of their family and/or close friends because of the recent election.
- The people of the Philippines who have once again been hit by a major typhoon

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
- Dianne Simmons for planting mums at the base of the church sign in front of the church and then replacing them with flags in commemoration of Veterans' Day and the veterans of 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

The Diaconate will be meeting again in December to continue the discussion of when we might be able to resume worship and other church meetings on some level. At the present time, with

the coronavirus numbers dramatically up in Massachusetts and with gatherings of any kind, including religious gatherings, identified as a major source of the contagion, it seems quite unlikely that we will be able to gather together in worship during the Christmas season, which begins the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Most churches are hoping that early availability of an effective and safe vaccine will make our Easter celebration at least a possibility.

BTW, the number of people directly infected with the coronavirus through attending worship or other church events at Crossroads Community Church in Fitchburg and/or contact with infected parishioners has increased by 50 since last week's posting. The total is now 200 confirmed cases, placing Fitchburg in the "red zone." It is estimated that 78 businesses and 22 cities/towns have been affected by this spread. No word yet on the parishioner who on a ventilator in the ICU of a local hospital.

Missions:

Our mission outreach for the month of November is World Vision. Did you know that over 69 million people around the world at the present time have been forced to flee their homes, to become refugees? World Vision provides health care, emergency food, clean water, and shelter assistance to this vulnerable population. I recall that in one of our recent hurricanes, I believe it was Hurricane Katrina, World Vision was among the very first agencies to be on the scene.

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.

Jesus said, "I was a stranger and you invited me in." (Matthew 25:35)

Audio Weekly Worship Service

We are offering a weekly worship service that is posted on the home page of our church website: 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 is sent to those 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. The pastor's reflection is also accessible in printed form on our website in the sermon section.

Quote/Thought of the Day

"When people try to suppress something, it's normally because that thing holds power. They're afraid of your power." Lizzo

Lizzo is a gifted musical artist who made this statement encouraging people to vote as she accepted an honor at the Billboard Music Awards on October 14.

A Second Quote/Thought of the Day

We all need to experience/access/practice patience if we are to reverse the upward trend of this coronavirus pandemic and return life and our economy to not only normal but healthy.

"All things come to those who wait." Violet Fane

According to Wikipedia, Violet Fane (1842-1905) is the literary pseudonym of Lady Mary Montgomerie Currie. A poet, writer, and later an ambassadress who was active in the British literary scene, Fane was a literary celebrity associated with Aestheticism and Medievalism. Her verses were set to music by composers such as Paolo Tosti. A well-known figure in London society, Fane's coterie included literary persons such as Robert Browning, Algernon Swinburne, Alfred Austin, James McNeil Whistler, and Oscar Wilde, who praised the oracular bent of Fane's opinions on "the relation of art to nature" by saying that she lived between Parnassus and Piccadilly."

However, since all “truths” contain paradox within them, consider the following quote as well. Mario Andretti, whom you all know, and whose laps around Daytona and Talladega are much easier to place geographically than references to Parnassus, offers the following:

“Everything comes to those who wait—except a cat.”

BTW, Parnassus is a limestone mountain in central Greece, adjacent to the site of the ancient city of Delphi that was sacred to Apollo and was the home of the Muses. The term is generally used to indicate the “home” of poetry, literature, and learning.

Attention-Grabbling Church Signs

Honk If You Love Jesus

Text While Driving If You Want To Meet Him

Taken From (Apparently Unedited) Church Sunday Morning Bulletins

“Pot Luck Supper—Prayer and Medication to Follow”

Interesting “Facts”

From some of my recent reflections, one might draw the conclusion that I am highly critical of the Christian church. Actually, I am. As I mentioned in my Reflection last week, a central tenet of the Protestant Reformation, which we recently “celebrated” (October 31 is the date that Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg), is that the church stands in continual need of reform. In keeping with the spirit of *Attack on Christendom* by Soren Kierkegaard, which I read as an undergraduate, whenever the institutional church and its clergy, especially the bishops whom Kierkegaard excoriates, line up with the values of society, it ceases being the Christian church.

However, the church is doing some wonderful things in the world. For example, in response to the plight of thousands of New England households that are struggling with medical bills that are beyond their ability to pay, the United Church of Christ announced recently that it had “bought up” a total of \$26.2 million in medical debt, \$8.4 million for households in New England and New York.

A group of United Church of Christ congregations in southern New England led an effort to purchase and forgive the debt of 7,175 households in New England and New York, along with 12,144 first responders and medical workers across the country. Apparently, it is possible to purchase what is essentially uncollectable debt at a dramatically reduced rate, pay it off, and remove the debt from the family’s credit rating. I did not know this. But someone did—and acted on it!

Sixty-one UCC churches in Massachusetts were involved, contributing more than \$200,000 to RIP Medical Debt, a nonprofit that buys and forgives the debt of those in need. In order to qualify for this assistance, a family has to either face insolvency, be making less than two times the federal poverty level, or be financially burdened.

What a great idea! Can you imagine what it would feel like to learn that your crushing medical debt had been bought from your hospital and physicians and paid off by unknown people who care? Who says we don’t have some great people here in America—and in churches that care, churches that have a sense of what Jesus wants them to be?

The Pastor's Reflection

(This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, Ph.D. 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)

**Scripture Lessons: Acts 4:32-37; 5:1-11
Luke 12:13-21**

I would like to share something I recently rediscovered, something that I wrote a long time ago and which, I believe, has never seen the light of day.

This past week, while Darlene is recuperating from her dislocated shoulder, she has spent what I believe to be an inordinate amount of time seated at the kitchen table sorting family photographs into albums, copying and organizing recipes (most of which, I will bet, will never make it to our table, but which are "too good" to throw away), and going through all kinds of other papers from the past. A few days ago, she handed me two yellowed sheets of paper stapled together and asked me if I could remember it. I confess I didn't, even though it was obviously written by me.

The pages were yellowed, so I know it must have been written some time ago. I recognize the type; it had been typed on my old IBM electric typewriter. Since it is a personal reflection on the threat posed by The Bomb, on the feared nuclear holocaust, I suspect that it should be dated to the late 1960's or the 1970's. I find it interesting that I commented on this period of history in my last Reflection, specifically our misguided belief that if we attached a fallout shelter to our houses, we would be safe. I wonder if I wrote this piece for inclusion in the newsletter of a church that I was serving. It is possible that I just wrote it for myself, though this is unlikely. I don't tend to do that.

I don't think of myself as a writer, and I am certainly not a poet (I know some poets, and I am not one), but, in all modesty, this isn't that bad! A literary critic might detect echoes of the wedding ceremony, William Butler Yeats's *The Second Coming*, T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, which contains the following:

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

and the comic strip Pogo. If we were to replace my references to The Bomb with COVID-19 or The Coronavirus Pandemic, it would speak to us today. Just as I believe Eliot's verses speak to us.

FACING APOCALYPSE

By Paul Sanderson

*Gathered together
in the presence of God
and Satan,
the two confused—
or are we confused?*

*Over all, beneath all, behind all,
The Shadow
of The Bomb:
our individual
and collective*

apocalypse(s),
our individual
and collective
death(s),
our individual
and collective
transformation(s),
not only at the end
of the age,
but now.

We search
for power,
for answers,
though we are not quite sure
what we will do with it/them
if/when we find some/any.

Struck by our impotence—
we can feel it in our anger—
the impotence of our little
individual and collective ego

(see how little it is?)
to “solve”
the “problem”
we have “created,”
we turn inward,
searching for
the dream,
the image,
the inner answer,
searching for
hope,
love,
creativity,
development,
the education of the heart,
the thread of Ariadne,
so easily broken
and lost.

Who is this
incarnation of terror, this
creature of the night
who speaks to us? This
creature of dark and light who
confronts us
as we stand alone
or together
at the break of day
or sunset
and demands recognition?

Shall we
fight it or

befriend it?

*What must we do/be
to gain its blessing?*

*We have met
The Enemy
and it
is us.*

I note, with a certain degree of embarrassment, that I was apparently as much in love with parentheses and the use/abuse of the slash/virgule/solidus as I am now.

This little poem (?) illustrates a point I have been trying to make in many/most of my Reflections. I find myself uncomfortable with descriptions of the coronavirus as a living being with conscious intent, e.g., “The virus has been lying in wait for us;” “It’s going to attack us with a second and maybe a third wave;” “The virus has been waiting for us to let down our guard;” etc. From these depictions of the virus as an enemy of humanity, one would think that the problem is the virus itself.

I demur. The problem is not the virus; it is our response to the virus, a response that falls somewhere on the spectrum between enlightened/scientifically informed/socially responsible on one end of the spectrum, and stupid on the other end. The problem back when my little poem was written was not The Bomb, it was the way that we were using and/or threatening to use our atomic capabilities to destroy The Enemy (who was someone outside us who doesn’t think like us). We didn’t need to solve the problem of The Bomb; we needed to solve the problem of our hearts, which were stuck in the Stone Age, and our reason, which was mired in a pre-Enlightenment period of cognitive development.

Take the example of poverty, which is a serious social problem on an international scale. I would suggest that poverty is not a thing, not a problem in itself. The ubiquitous caste system that intentionally creates a caste of people on the bottom rungs of the socio-economic ladder, and that establishes a religious/political/police system to keep them “in their place,” is the real problem. To this, we could add our individual and collective greed. If we could realize that all our brothers and sisters are, like us, incarnations of the Infinite, that we are all interconnected, and that to help them is to help ourselves, there would be no “poverty.”

You might regard this as playing with words. Once again, I demur. As I tried to say in my poem, “We have met The Enemy, and it is us.” I took this from a Pogo comic strip many years ago (probably before your time).

As a pastor, I have heard parishioners share their anger at God for not doing or preventing what the person thought “He” should be doing or preventing. Many years ago, a beloved parishioner, a vibrant young woman who had grown up in the church, left the church—and her faith—because God did not heal a friend of hers, the mother of two young children, from cancer. She said, “How can I believe in a God who would let this woman die?” This is a difficult question to answer.

I know this isn’t comforting, and I am not denying or minimizing the validity of the woman’s hurt, sadness, and anger, but her loss of faith, her estrangement from God, her denial of God’s existence, may have been tied to unexamined and unrealistic expectations. We all hope (and perhaps even believe) that God will take care of us, that God will protect us and our loved ones just as an omnipotent and loving Father would do for his children.

At bottom, however, this is a childish fantasy. We want God to remove our problems, to spare us from pain, to take away our struggles, to make life easier for us, perhaps even to

prevent the death of those we love. As if this were God's intent! Where in the Bible can we find evidence of this kind of relationship? Most of the people who were close to God experienced pain and struggle. Think of John the Baptist and Paul, who were beheaded. Think of Stephen, who was stoned to death. Think of Peter, who was crucified upside down. Think of Jesus.

Do we really believe that God should “save us” from the coronavirus by miraculously taking it away, or by passing over the houses where “believers” have marked the lintel above their front door with oil? When we pray for this, we are framing the coronavirus as the problem, and God as the solution. But is it really the coronavirus that is the problem, or our reaction to it, our way of dealing with it? Is it really fair to ask or expect God to bail us out of problems that we have created—like the spread of the coronavirus, the Bomb, war, poverty, racism, exploitation, the emergence of totalitarian leaders who promise to protect us from “the Enemy” and lead us backward into the Promised Land?

Don't worry! God actually *is* working to spare us from the ravages of the coronavirus, but the solution will not come down from on high. God, as the Holy Spirit, the indwelling spirit of Christ, is trying to change *us*! God is trying to change us from within. It is tempting to ask God for a miracle because a divine miracle asks nothing of us, expects nothing from us. God does it *for us*; we don't even have to change, to grow. We are simply the recipients of God's grace.

However, if we believe that God works within us and through us, just as God worked within and through Joseph, Mary, Jesus, and the disciples, this requires *a lot* of us. It requires us, as I suggested in my poem, to own our own shadow. It calls us to honestly face the ways that we have helped create, or have helped perpetuate, the problems with which we, our nation, and the world are beset. It calls us, as Pogo suggests, to realize that we have met the Enemy, and it is us. Then it calls us to do the hard but joyous work of becoming agents of God's healing, reconciling power in the world!

Today, on Stewardship Sunday, I would offer one last example of a misplaced sense of where the real problem lies. People often quote the maxim, “Money is the root of all evil.” This makes it seem like money itself is the problem. But this is ridiculous! Money, which is simply a convenient way to facilitate the exchange of goods and services, can be used for good and it can be used for evil. Think of how the United Church of Christ has used money to buy up and forgive people's crushing medical debt. Actually, the above maxim is commonly misquoted. The apostle Paul, in his first letter to Timothy, said,

For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (1 Timothy 6:10)

Note that it is not *money*, but *the love of money* that is the problem, that is a stumbling block to our faith. This is in keeping with several other biblical verses that seek to guide *our attitude* toward money, toward riches and an attachment to wealth:

Place no trust in extortion, or false hope in stolen goods. If your riches increase, do not set your heart upon them. (Psalm 62:10)

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. (Matthew 6:19)

Those who want to be rich, however, fall into temptation and become ensnared by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. (1 Timothy 6:9)

These quotes are a reminder of one of the lessons that we are hopefully learning from the restrictions that have been placed upon us to limit our exposure to and/or our spreading of the coronavirus. Along with the lessons of how difficult it is to remain disciplined, how quickly we become impatient, how self-indulgent we are, and the realization that we are actually not “all

in this together,” with white-collar workers suffering an unemployment rate of 3% and blue-collar workers an unemployment rate of 32%, many of us have learned how much we can do without. One of the great gifts that can emerge from this individual and collective ordeal is the opportunity to learn the “secret” of living simply. Believe me, this is a precious lesson!

How much do we really need? How much do we really need to live? How much do we really need to be happy? When we approach these questions from a biblical/spiritual perspective, we find that the stewardship of what we have, of our time, talent, and treasure is an expression of our faith and an important dimension of our spiritual life.

The Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, describes the apostles’ ministry following Jesus’ death and resurrection. It tells of Saul’s persecution of the early Christians, and, following his conversion on the road to Damascus, his missionary journeys. It recounts the martyrdom of Peter, Stephen, James, and Paul. It witnesses to acts of healing performed by the apostles. It also describes the structure of the early Christian community.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is an interesting text for us to consider on Stewardship Sunday, which, in our church, coincides with Thanksgiving (for obvious reasons). It begins with a description of how the early church handled its finances.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.

This was an early form of communism. No one owned anything, nor did anyone need to. The early Christians could embrace this form of communal living because they were of “one heart and soul.” They were united in a common belief, in a common way of life, and in a common mission. Each person did not look out for him/herself; they all looked out for each other. They shared. Whatever anyone needed was provided by the group. Acts says,

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

What an interesting concept! What an interesting way to address the problem of poverty—by sharing! However, this form of communal living was decidedly countercultural. The people of Jesus’ day, as in our day, owned personal property. They looked out for themselves and their family. Jesus challenged the people of his day to reach out past their families, past those whom they considered to be “their own kind.” He called them to expand their concept of neighbor. From passages of scripture that identify Judas as the keeper of the treasury, it is possible that Jesus and his disciples actually did create the kind of communal society that is described in the book of Acts. Neither Jesus nor his disciples may have owned personal property.

This seems a little unsettling to those of us who have grown up in a capitalistic society and have prospered within it. Compared to the standard of living around the world, we have a good deal of wealth, a good deal of personal property. One indicator of the importance that we assign to our property is the amount of money that Americans spend on home security. We want to make sure that no one takes our possessions. Like the people of Jesus’ day, we, too, believe that charity begins at home. We take care of our family first. And many Christians believe, contrary to the biblical description of the early Christian community, that Christianity is incompatible with socialism, but it is definitely compatible with rampant, free-market capitalism.

Jesus challenges us to expand our understanding of family. He calls us to reach out to those in need. He tells the rich young man to sell all that he has and give it to the poor, that he might become a follower of the Way. We tend to give of our surplus, that which we feel we can spare. This was not the attitude of the early church.

As related in the Book of Acts, Joseph, a native of Cyprus, sells a field. He lays the proceeds of this sale at the apostles' feet. This is an act of faith, an act of trust. It is based on the belief that if you let go, if you give, you will receive many times over. If you become caught up in grasping, in the desire for control, you will bring suffering upon yourself and others.

Ananias, too, sells a piece of property. With his wife's knowledge, however, he holds back some of the proceeds. He lays only a part at the apostles' feet.

Scripture doesn't say why he and his wife do this. Perhaps they were hedging their bets. By appearing to throw their lot in with the others, they could draw from the common fund as they had need. But they also had a secret stash, perhaps for wants instead of needs, for expenditures that might not be approved by the apostles. Ananias may have had doubts about following Jesus, about becoming a Christian. He might have thought that if he changed his mind in the future and wanted to leave the church, he would walk away with nothing. So, he set something aside for a rainy day.

Peter knows immediately what has happened. He realizes that Satan has split Ananias off from the Holy Spirit. Ananias is not following the Holy Spirit, but his own selfish ends. He has given in to the temptation that Jesus resisted in the wilderness. Peter reminds Ananias that he didn't have to put anything in the fund. He didn't need to throw in his lot with the other believers. But he should have made up his mind. He should have either been both-feet-in or both-feet-out. In trying to play it both ways, he lied to God, to the Holy Spirit, and to the apostles.

When his secret is discovered, Ananias falls down and dies. It doesn't say what he dies from; he just falls down and dies. The young men come, wrap up his body, carry him out and bury him. A "great fear seized all who heard of it." Perhaps Ananias was not the only one who was holding something back, who was claiming to be a follower of Jesus but who was really one-foot-in and one-foot-out!

It is possible that this happened as described. Scripture says that three hours later, Ananias's wife, Sapphira, comes to where the apostles are gathered. She may have been expecting praise for laying their gift, the proceeds from the sale of their land, at the apostles' feet. However, she receives something quite different.

Like a good lawyer, Peter wants to determine whether husband and wife conspired to lie to the apostles about the amount of money they received for the land. He asks Sapphira if she and her husband sold the land for the amount they gave to the fund. Sapphira tells Peter that was indeed the price. In her answer, Sapphira has convicted herself. Peter says,

How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.

When Sapphira hears this judgment, this sentence of death delivered by the head of the church, she falls down at Peter's feet and dies. Just as Peter predicted, the young men come in, carry her out, and bury her next to her husband.

If I were a fire-and-brimstone preacher, I would suggest that this is what happens to people who hold back from the church, who do not pledge what they could and should. However, it seems like a strong punishment for being weak of faith and wavering in commitment. If this sentence were passed on all who withhold from the church, we would have a very small church and a very large cemetery! We need to find a way to help people who are one-foot-in and one-foot out, put both feet in. If they do, I trust they will pledge what they should. And they will receive what they give—many times over.

Ananias and Sapphira may have actually died. The story could also be read symbolically. When we hold back from God, we die in different ways. When our possessions become so important that they come between us and a trust in life, we die inside. We become rich in things, but poor in soul.

In our gospel lesson, the same Luke who wrote the Book of Acts relates Jesus' teaching about material possessions. Actually, it is not about material possessions, *per se*, but about our attitude toward material possessions.

Jesus responds to a younger brother, who is upset at the injustice of the traditional system of inheritance. In Jesus' day, the elder brother received double the share of his younger siblings. The younger brother asks Jesus to correct what he experiences as an injustice. What he does not see is that, from a spiritual perspective, this is not a matter of justice; it is a matter of grasping. It is a matter of greed. Jesus tells him to "let it go."

In the Parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus tells us to be on guard against any kind of greed. The man has all the possessions he could ever need, but even this is not enough. He hoards what he has. In his focus on building bigger and bigger barns, he forgets about his soul. If he knew his soul would be demanded that night, he might have paid more attention to the spiritual dimension of life. His folly was in storing up riches on earth, but not being rich toward God.

Jesus tells us that God knows what we need to live. He also tells us that we do not need as much as we think we do. He tells us that we worry too much about the future, about making sure we will have everything we could possibly need. This gets in the way of our sharing. It undermines our stewardship. It closes our hearts to those who are in need. Our grasping pulls us out of a sense of community, leaving us one-foot-in and one-foot-out, just as Ananias and Sapphira were in withholding what they had from the early church.

Jesus tells us to trust. He tells us to sell our possessions and give to those in need. He tells us to store up treasure in heaven. He tells us that where our treasure is, there will our heart be also.

As we enter into this stewardship season, let us consider how much we really need. I suspect, like the man in the Parable of the Rich Fool, we need a lot less than we think we do. If we can come to this realization, and if we place our trust in God, our church will have no problem raising what we need to meet our operating expenses in the coming year, and we will be generous in our support of some very worthwhile missions.

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. Share your time, talent, and treasure with the world. Above all, don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul