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December 20, 2020 – The Fourth Sunday of Advent

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

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, and the patience and dedication to make this a reality for all people.
- Our world. We stand in need of a vision of world community, a world where people care about each other and where we know deep down that we are all in this together.
- Nature. Our environment. The world in which we live. Our little planet is in need of healing and tender-loving care.
- Those who are hungry or food insecure in our own country and even in our own state
- Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, our President-Elect and Vice President-Elect, and their new administration

As we continue our journey from Thanksgiving through this Advent season, reminding ourselves of that for which we are grateful, we need to remember those who are struggling as much, if not more, than we. This morning I would like us to hold in our prayers those who are struggling with addictions, with substance abuse disorder, especially those who are struggling with drug addiction.

Since the pandemic with its attendant restrictions began, the rate of fatalities from opiate overdose has gone up, raising concerns from public health officials. An estimated 1,517 people died of overdoses in the first nine months of this year. More than 2,000 people have died of opioid overdoses every year since 2016, when Massachusetts saw a grim record of 2,102 deaths. Not surprisingly, Black and Latino people are overrepresented in these statistics. From my limited understanding of opiate addiction, many of these fatalities are not accidental overdoses. To be sure, the contamination of an opioid by street fentanyl greatly increases the chance of accidental death. However, many times the fatal overdose is the final expression of defeat, of despair by the user/abuser. It is often an indicator of a loss of hope.

We need to hold in our prayers those who have lost hope not only of a better world but also of a better life for themselves, those who have lost hope of living their life clean and sober, restoring their damaged relationships, and finding, perhaps for the first time, the meaning of their life. Not surprisingly, men and women who have been recently released from prison and have nowhere to give up on the possibility of fitting into a society that creates barriers rather than bridges to the life their inclusion. These people have often already come to the conclusion that society has given up on them, that the lives of those who struggle with substance abuse disorder and ex-cons don't matter.

I realize this is controversial but, in addition to making naloxone (Narcan) more readily available to counter the fatal effects of drug overdose, I support the establishment of safe places where people who are struggling with addiction can receive an injection of an uncontaminated drug with a clean needle by a caring, compassionate healthcare provider. These safe injection sites can offer the user resources such as housing, meals, medical care, and recovery programs. First, and above all, providing a place for safe injections saves lives. We want people struggling with substance abuse disorder to stay alive in the hope that someday they will come to see that that which they seek through the drug is already offered to them by the Holy Spirit.

I know that some people believe that establishing safe injection sites will only encourage the use/abuse of drugs. From what I understand, this is not true. Cities that have established programs like this have not reported increased drug use/abuse, but they have reported decreased emergency room visits and deaths from drug overdoses.

We know that addiction festers and grows in isolation, and we know that recovery is available and is facilitated through community. The problem is that, at the present time, we are asking people to isolate. Even with naloxone, pandemic-related isolation means that there is not always another person present to administer it.

Christian love begins with accepting people where they are and ministering to them where they are in whatever way we can.

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

- Cathy Ambler, a new Friend of the Church, for providing the two beautiful Christmas wreaths that adorn our front doors

- Those who have already turned in their yearly pledges to the General Fund, and those members of our larger church family who have either already sent or pledged a special gift to support us financially in the year to come

COVID-19 and Sunday Worship as the Gathered Church

I know it is difficult in this blessed Advent and Christmas season to be patient. But we have to be careful. We have to be disciplined. We have to be socially responsible.

A recent outbreak of Covid-19 in Medford drives home the point that Dr. Fauci and so many other scientists and medical personnel are making. Apparently, over 700 cases of Covid-19 have been traced to two super-spreader events that took place over the Thanksgiving holiday: a restaurant that offered indoor dining, and a large private gathering.

We would all like to be together with family over the holidays. We would all like to be with our church family throughout Advent and on Christmas Eve. Darlene and I would like to be with Corey, with Mike and Kristen, and especially with Miles on Christmas Day. But to do so would be socially irresponsible. Somewhere, this becomes a moral issue for us, one that should be guided by our religious faith and also strengthened by our religious faith.

We can do it.

Birthdays in December

Gilbert Joe	Dec. 2
Nancy Hite	Dec. 3
Betty Tebbetts	Dec. 12
Tanner Willman.	Dec. 13
Bayley Willman	Dec. 18
Darcy Hilbert	Dec. 20
Stacey Willman.	Dec. 21
Dick Varney	Dec. 24
Justin Elias	Dec. 27

Anniversaries in December

Michael & Kristen (Sanderson) Springer	Dec. 16
Scott & Lynn (Lees) Webster	Dec. 23
Michael & Dorothy Larson	Dec. 24

Missions:

Our mission outreach for the month of December is the Salvation Army. The Salvation Army provides meals and other resources to families in need, families that have been hit hard by the pandemic, families that may have become homeless. Every December, those members of our church family who donate to the Salvation Army through our church's special offering will have their names appear on a Christmas card that we send to everyone. This card takes the place of sending out individual Christmas cards to people in our church family, and the money that would have gone to the purchase of cards and postage provide goods and services for people in need. **Please, if you would like your name to appear on the card, please send your donation to the church Collector, Jim Holmes, by December 20.**

Audio Weekly Worship Service

We are offering a weekly virtual worship service. There is a link to it posted on the home page of our church website: www.firstcommunitychurch.com. There is also a link at the top of the Sermons page. 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 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

"Find a place inside where there's joy, and the joy will burn out the pain."

Joseph Campbell

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 also healthy.

"Impatience makes us get ahead of ourselves, reaching out for something in the future and not really being content with where we are, here and now."

David Steindl-Rast

I highly recommend Brother David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B., who has written several books on the contemplative life. Born in Vienna, he studied art at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, and anthropology and psychology at the University of Vienna. In 1953, he joined the Benedictine monastery of Mount Saviour in Elmira, New York. He has been involved in monastic renewal in the United States and in the dialogue of Eastern and Western spirituality, much as Thomas Merton was. I particularly liked his books *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness*, and *A Listening Heart: The Art of Contemplative Living*. He and Thomas Merton were the first two spiritual writers from the Roman Catholic tradition that I read.

Attention-Grabbling Church Signs

God Prefers

Kind Atheists

Over Hateful Christians

Taken From (Apparently Unedited) Church Sunday Morning Bulletins

"We need to inform you that Bishop McNulty recently died. He had a clear vision of what the church wanted him to do."