

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: Psalm 1
Ephesians 3:20-21
John 10:7-10

"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

Well, here we are approaching the national holiday of Thanksgiving. I daresay that for most of us, it will not be like other Thanksgivings.

Those of us who are taking the coronavirus restrictions seriously will not be getting together as families on a day that seems to be set aside to celebrate family. Darlene and I won't be getting together with Jay, Ann-Marie, Zach, Charlie, and Emily Kate, though we have seldom celebrated Thanksgiving together since they moved to South Carolina. We won't be getting together with Corey, who lives about an hour up #495 in Groton. We will not be getting together with Mike, Kristen, and Miles (who is now a half a year old); they live a half hour up #495 in Marlborough. Each of our families will be having its own Thanksgiving dinner. We may Facetime for part of it, but it's not the same.

I confess, in addition to our own Thanksgiving service and the harvest/autumnal decorations that have traditionally graced our sanctuary thanks to David Sickles, I will also miss the United Parishes of Southborough ecumenical Thanksgiving service. I think this is the year it was supposed to be held at our church.

I am trying to look on the positive side of what feels like loss after loss after loss. Perhaps this is the year that we will discover the spiritual dimension of this secular celebration, the sense of what Thanksgiving is all about. Contrary to popular belief, it is not about family; it is about nurturing and expressing a sense of gratitude for all we have, for all our blessings. If we were in church today, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, we would have sung Thanksgiving hymns like *We Plow the Fields*, which was written in 1782 by Matthias Claudius:

*We plow the fields and scatter
But it is fed and watered
He sends the snow in winter,
The breezes and the sunshine,*

*The good seed on the land,
By God's almighty hand;
The warmth to swell the grain,
And soft, refreshing rain.*

*He only is the Maker
He paints the wayside flower,
The winds and waves obey Him,
Much more to us, His children,*

*Of all things near and far;
He lights the evening star;
By him the birds are fed;
He gives our daily bread.*

*We thank Thee, then, O Father,
The seedtime and the harvest,
Accept the gifts we offer,
And what Thou most desirest,*

*For all things bright and good,
Our life, our health, our food;
For all Thy love imparts,
Our humble, thankful hearts.*

I love these old hymns! I beg you to look past the eighteenth-century language which is not inclusive, which, in its depiction of God as masculine, does not do credit to either God or half of the human race, but these hymns still evoke beautiful feelings within us when we sing them together as a community of faith.

It is predicted that, on this Thanksgiving, 40% of Americans will be traveling, mostly by car. The highways will, once again, be clogged on the day before Thanksgiving. I think we know what this means. Despite the recent coronavirus surge in our state and around the country, despite the pleas from Governor Baker, other governors, and Dr. Anthony Fauci, many families will be getting together this coming Thursday. If roughly half of Americans are traveling, they will probably be visiting the other half that will be at home. I know that family is important. I know that tradition is important. But I hope that we will not experience an even greater surge in hospitalizations 2-3 weeks from now and a surge in deaths 2-3 months later. If we do, as I have said before, it is not fair to blame the virus.

This Thanksgiving will be different for many because there will be an empty seat at the table. I think of those of you who have lost loved ones this past year, some because of the coronavirus. In our little church, we would have read their names on All Saints' and All Souls' Sunday during our Service of Remembrance, Celebration, and Presence. I think of those of you who are separated from parents or spouses who are in assisted living facilities or nursing homes, facilities that are now back in lockdown mode. For many of us, this Thanksgiving will not be the same as it was last year, and it will not be the way we want it to be.

We have suffered many losses this past year. The quote from Jodi Picoult's book helps to expand our consciousness of the range of different losses that we experience, for example, Ethel's experience of "losing" a loved one to dementia. The darkness of loss hangs heavy over us. It hangs heavy over our nation and the world.

It is difficult in times like these to access feelings of thanksgiving, to truly experience gratitude for our many blessings. What we *don't* have registers more strongly than what we have. It might be helpful for us to make a list of all the people and things, tangible and intangible, for which we are grateful. The list of people could include those who are no longer with us. We could place these loved ones in the "loss" column, for the sadness related to their absence is poignant. Or we could place them in the "gratitude" column for all they meant to us, for the way our lives were changed for the better because they were an important part of it. Or we could place them in both columns. It is up to us where we place their names.

One of the lessons that we can learn from this pandemic is our realization of the extent to which we live in a world of our own making. We tend to think of the world within which we live as objective, as a given. The existentialists call this the *Umwelt*, the world into which we are thrown. However, phenomenologically speaking, the world within which we live is far more subjective than we realize. In fact, it may be *totally* subjective. Our "world" is actually the way we experience it. We are the ones who put things in the "good" column or the "bad" column.

When I think of the possibility that we live in a world of our own making, and that many of the limitations and all of the suffering we experience in life have been imposed by us, I think of a vignette I heard many years ago about a Scotsman. As you know, I try to avoid making stereotypical statements about any group of people, especially when the comments articulate a prejudice that might be hurtful to members of that group. Some groups of people, however, have personality traits that most members of that group would freely and proudly own. The English, for example, tend to be proper and reserved (Darlene and I are currently watching *The Crown*). Italians freely express strong feelings (and they can understand opera). Germans tend to be serious and neat (there are few German comedians). My mother, who was German, fit this stereotype. She had no sense of humor, and you could eat off her floor. I suspect that deep down she had reversed the saying that "cleanliness is next to godliness." For my mother, godliness was next to cleanliness.

The Scots have a reputation for being courageous warriors. When I was on my second trekking pilgrimage to Nepal and Tibet, I was not above teasing Ian and Derek, both of whom were from Scotland, about being from a country where men wear skirts. They knew I was

kidding. I actually have a lot of respect for a group of men who, when they get together, drink a lot of scotch and see how far they can throw telephone poles and large boulders.

Scots are known for being thrifty. Some have actually accused them of being tight. My grandfather, who was English, used to say that “a Scotsman is tighter than a Pullman car window.” Since most of you are too young to remember what a Pullman car is, this saying probably doesn’t mean much to you. Most Scotsmen and Scotswomen are proud of being frugal. Anyway, in the hope that I am not violating the rules of political correctness or insulting any of you who are of Scottish ancestry, here is the story.

A Scotsman was making a trans-Atlantic journey from Great Britain to America. Determined not to spend any extra money on the trip, he isolated himself in his small room in the steerage section of the ship. To save money on meals, he ate nothing but crackers and cheese from a supply that he had brought on board.

On the last day of the trip, unable to stand the sight of crackers and cheese any longer, the Scotsman thought, “Since this is the very last day, I think I’ll splurge and treat myself to a real meal.”

The steward was surprised to see the Scotsman seated at the dinner table for the first time. When the steward inquired where the Scotsman had been for the entire voyage, the passenger confessed that, in his determination not to spend any unnecessary money, he had stayed in his cabin and had eaten crackers and cheese for the entire week. The steward was shocked.

“I really hate to tell you this,” the steward said, “but all the meals were included in the price of your ticket!”

We could learn a valuable lesson from the Scots. To live simply is to be a good steward of our blessings. If we do not become overly attached to our possessions, we will be able to let them go. We will be able to share with others. We actually need much less than we think we do. This could be another lesson we have learned from the pandemic. Grasping, whether in relation to things or people, leads to suffering. To live simply is a profound spiritual discipline.

As we enter into the Thanksgiving season, however, I do not want us to think about the spiritual discipline of living simply. I would like us to think about a spirituality of abundance. I would like us to think about living abundantly!

According to Webster, abundance is defined as: (1) an extremely plentiful or over sufficient quantity or supply, as in *an abundance of grain*; (2) overflowing fullness, as in *abundance of the heart*; and (3) affluence or wealth, as in *the enjoyment of abundance*. Each of these meanings finds expression in our scriptures.

Psalms 1 is a psalm of abundance in the sense of affluence. It tells us that those whose delight is in the law of the Lord, those who meditate on God’s law throughout the day and night,

*. . . are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.*

The psalmist tells us that abundance will come to us if we make our relationship with the Lord the center of our life. Our “tree” will be fed by an underground stream of water, that stream that Jesus calls the Water of Life. If we set down roots near this stream, our leaves will not

wither. We will not dry up and become brittle. We will be able to stand firm when the storms of life assail us. And we will bear fruit. In all we do, we will prosper.

The apostle Paul testified that he had learned, in whatever state he was, to be content. (Then again, Paul never lived in the State of Massachusetts.) But Paul also speaks of abundance. He tells us that Christianity is essentially a religion of abundance. In the third chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul shares the following benediction:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

In this passage, Paul tells us that God is working within us to give us far more than we imagine is possible. We may think we know what to ask for in prayer. The Holy Spirit, who is at work within us, not only can teach us how to pray, but can also empower us in ways beyond our imagination. We simply have to open ourselves to this experience to realize the truth and the power of Paul's benediction.

The abundance that scripture promises us is a spiritual abundance. It provides us with resources for living. It fills us with love and compassion. It provides us with the resources of prayer, presence, and community in times of crisis. Paul tells us that if we grow and deepen spiritually, we will receive the abundant gifts of the Spirit.

In his letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul reminds his parishioners of the connection between their faith and the love they have for one another. He says,

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. (2 Thessalonians 1:3)

Paul tells us that as we grow in faith, as we draw from the resources of the community of faith that is the church, we will become more loving, and we will be able to remain steadfast in the face of afflictions.

This can be our experience if we make the commitment to grow in our Christian faith. When our faith "grows abundantly," it will bear fruit in our lives.

The message of the gospel is a message, a promise of abundance. Jesus tells us, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." Jesus wants us to live lives that are rich and full, not with material possessions but with the Spirit. Though he came in the form of a servant, Jesus lived a life of abundance. Though he needed absolutely nothing, scripture tells us "From his *fullness* we have all received, grace upon grace." (John 1:16)

I think of this theme of abundance when I reflect on the many ways that Kristen and Mike have been changed through Miles's entrance into their family, the many ways that Darlene and I have been changed through our relationship with this adorable little bundle of joy. Children are indeed a blessing, a gift from God. They enrich our lives in many ways.

I do need to point out, however, that this truth applies to the spiritual and not to the material realm. Children make our lives incredibly rich. However, they also devour our finances like blood-sucking little leeches. They want braces; they want bicycles; and the next thing you know they want to go to college! If anyone thinks that having children is a good deal financially, please consult your financial advisor!

Since children are not a ticket to financial prosperity or even financial security (they don't seem to get the idea of taking care of their parents in their old age), there must be a different

and a deeper reason for having them. I think we know what it is. Children provide us with the opportunity to love in a very special way. This love shapes our soul. Children provide us with the opportunity to experience a selfless kind of love. Whereas a marriage may be a 50-50 proposition, with children the percentage seems to be about 90-10 (if we are lucky). The miracle is not only that we give so much to our children in so many different ways, but that we give to them so joyfully! I think this must be the way that God gives to us, as a loving and devoted parent gives to his/her children.

As we approach the celebration of Thanksgiving, we need to remember that we have been invited to a banquet. Even now, a banquet is spread before us. Our Lord invites us to sit with him at table, not as servants but as friends. If we eat of the bread that he gives us, we will be filled.

Unfortunately, too many of us respond as the Scotsman did in my little vignette. Though a table of abundance awaits us in first class, we remain below in steerage. Because we do not believe in the abundance of God, we subsist on crackers and cheese. We become crackers-and-cheese Christians. We may not even realize that there is anything wrong with our diet until we see the banquet that we have been missing. We may not realize there is anything wrong with being a nominal or marginal Christian, unless or until we experience the kind of abundant living that comes to those who have faith.

Jesus tells us that this banquet, this table of abundance is absolutely free. It is a gift of grace, freely given to us by God. This may be difficult to believe, but it's true! This is the message, the good news of the Gospel.

Actually, the banquet is not really free. There is a cost. It's the cost of discipleship. Just as the Scotsman had to pay for his ticket, so we, too, have to invest in our own spiritual growth, in our own spiritual journey. I think we will find, however, that as we do so, as we discover the deeper meaning of Christian stewardship, we will discover that the resources for living that become available to us are well worth the cost.

When we can travel first class, why would we want to remain below in steerage? When we can dine in the captain's quarters, why would we want to subsist on crackers and cheese? As we enter into this Thanksgiving and Advent season, let us commit ourselves to grow and deepen in faith, in our personal relationship with our Lord, that we might receive of his promises, and that we might live lives of abundance.

Then, in keeping with the spirit of Stewardship Sunday, let us share this abundance with others.

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. Remember that we live in a world of our own making, and that the way we see the world and life can keep us from discovering the underground spiritual stream that will bless us with abundance, that will fill our hearts to overflowing with gratitude and joy. Remember what Jesus said: "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." Above all, don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul