

The Pastor's Reflection

January 3, 2021 – The Second Sunday After Christmas

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, Ph.D. is available in written (PDF) form by clicking on the name. It is also available in audio form as part of a devotional service. There is a link to the audio version posted on the home page of our church website: www.firstcommunitychurch.com as well as at the top of this Sermons page.

Scripture Lessons: Acts 3:1-10
Mark 16:9-20

"But Peter said, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.'" (Acts 3:6)

Happy New Year, everyone!! I always say this on the first Sunday of a new year, but this year I really, really mean it! I wish you all a happy, healthy new year!! This year it seems that the rituals attending the transition from one year to another, from the old to the new, took on a special meaning, a special import. Darlene and I even split a bottle of champagne to wash down our traditional nibbles. As we turn the page in our calendar (or burn the old one), marking our entry into the New Year, something just feels different!

As I write this, however, three days into the new year, I begin to wonder how long the warm glow of a new beginning, a brighter future will last. To be honest, it is already beginning to fade. The numbers (you know what numbers) keep going up. According to the Boston Globe, funeral homes in the hot spot of Southern California, despite processing as many as six times their normal rate of body removals, are finding they must turn away grieving families as they run out of space for the bodies. In some areas, it is virtually impossible to find a funeral home that can take one's loved one. New York is the fourth state to reach over a million cases of COVID-19, joining California, Texas, and Florida. And eleven GOP senators and senators-elect have indicated, with Vice President Pence's blessing, that they will vote to reject President-elect Joe Biden's electoral victory when Congress meets this week to formally certify it.

BTW, over half a million Americans in November alone fled the United States for Mexico, particularly Mexico City, Los Cabos, and Cancun, where, thanks to governmental malfeasance that rivels our own, pandemic restrictions are practically non-existent. They are practically non-existent despite Mexico City's health care system being so overwhelmed, with hospitals filled to capacity, that many people sick from COVID-19 are stuck at home with relatives struggling to buy them oxygen. Many of these American tourists, who want to be "free" to shop and not wear masks, are now saying that they intend to stay permanently. As one American ex-pat, who now calls Mexico City home, put it, "There were weeks where I just wouldn't leave my house—my mental health was definitely suffering." (You can't see it, but I am wiping a tear from my eye.). So much for American discipline, patience, fortitude, common sense and social responsibility.

You can't see it, but beside my computer is a hand-written list of all the bad/really bad/terrible/tragic things that happened this year that I can recall. It is quite a list. It is not numbered, but it goes into two pages. And this doesn't even include Tom Brady leaving/betraying/deserting us to go to Tampa Bay. BTW, in relation to the debate whether Brady needed Belichick or Belichick needed Brady, the results are coming in. The Buccaneers are headed to the playoffs while the Patriots, truly pathetic this year, are going home early. With Brady, Belichick was 219-64, went to 9 Super Bowls, and

came in first in the AFC East 17 times; without Brady, he is 61-71 with one playoff appearance. In his three Patriot seasons without Tom, Bill is 22-24 with no playoffs. You can draw your own conclusions. (But that's not the point.)

As I go down the list (I think you know what's on the list), I find myself getting depressed. And my list doesn't even list all the important people who died this past year. Read the lists of notable persons in various fields of life who are no longer with us, and you will realize how much poorer we are for their passing. I mention, in particular, Whitey Ford and Don Larson. Did I ever tell you that, on Monday, October 6, 1956, when I was a freshman in high school in Sunnyvale California, between classes I listened on the radio to Don Larson not only beat the Brooklyn Dodgers in Game 5 of the World Series in (old) Yankee Stadium, but pitch a perfect game? Mickey Mantle hit a home run, the only run that was needed by the men in pinstripes. The closest the Dodgers came to a hit was in the second inning, when Jackie Robinson hit a line drive off third baseman Andy Carey's glove, the ball caroming to shortstop Gil McDougald who threw Robinson out by a step, and in the fifth, when Mickey Mantle ran down Gil Hodges' deep fly to center field. But that's not the point.

Sigmund Freud, in an article he wrote on the psychological use of humor, expressed the theory that humor can be used as a defense against strong or overpowering negative feelings. I think that guy had a point.

Getting back to the lists. On a separate sheet of paper, I have listed all the good things I could think of that have happened this year; in particular I listed lessons we have learned and ways we have grown through our struggles with the coronavirus pandemic and its restrictions, the political divide in Washington and in our nation, the movement for racial equality, etc. This, unfortunately, is a much shorter list. It is comprised primarily of things I have discovered I can live without—like shopping in malls, going to restaurants, being with friends and family, and going to church. Yes, we have learned that we can survive; we can make do with much less. I do realize that I am saying this as a person who has been relatively unscathed by the coronavirus either medically or economically. For me, it was more of an inconvenience. For those members of our church who lost loved ones or who could not visit their loved ones in nursing homes, it was much more than this.

BTW, in relation to this second list, I have to mention something wonderful that happened in/to our family this past year. On May 16, 2020, little Miles Springer entered our lives. Because of this and so many other beautiful things that happened to me and to many of you, I am reticent to write 2020 off as one of the worst years in history. I think it was a very good year! Or, as Bill Belichick says, "It was what it was."

So, I am going to eschew my original plan to read my list of all the things that we will be only too happy to bid goodbye as we move from 2020 into the new year, and to read my list of all the things that were good, things that we learned about ourselves, our country, and the world that we hope to carry with us into a new and brighter tomorrow. The relative sizes of the two lists, as I glance at them, are depressing in themselves. In addition, each of has our own lists.

As you know, I believe that it is not outer events that shape us most deeply; it is our attitude toward these events, our response to them. And so, as we stand, perhaps shakily, perhaps somewhat anxiously in this liminal space between the old year and the new, between the past and the future, as we strain our imagination to peer into the darkness and mystery of the year to come, we encounter the matter of expectations.

Think about the past year, what you expected and what life actually brought you. At the risk of being accused of employing understatement as a literary technique, may I say that I suspect that in significant ways, 2020 did not turn out as you expected.

This past year was, how should we say, “different.” There are other adjectives we could use to describe our experience of the Year of Our Lord 2020, but I cannot include them in this reflection because I am a Christian minister and also because I fear the heavy hand of the Internet censors. But I think you know what they are.

Think back to last year’s New Year’s Eve. I remember it well, especially the New Year’s resolutions that, like this year, did not survive the first week. Life seemed so predictable. I knew what was going to happen in our little church between Christmas and Easter, between Easter and the summer months. I knew what was going to happen in our family—Jay was working for a new firm, Corey had just moved into a new church, and Kristen and Mike were expecting. Darlene was (thankfully) retired from teaching ESL (this year would have been a living hell for her as it turned out to be for other teachers). We were all (knock on wood) in relatively good health. But the year didn’t turn out as we, as I, expected. Not at all!

I suspect it didn’t turn out as you expected, either. Now, as you stand at the gate of the year, take a moment to think about the year to come, what you anticipate. I hate to break it to you, but the year to come will probably differ from your hopes, your wishes, your expectations in dramatic or unexpected ways.

The gifted writer and director Steven Spielberg once said, “All of us every single year, we’re a different person. I don’t think we’re the same person all our lives.” Mr. Spielberg echoes what the Greek philosopher Heraclitus noted several thousand years ago: that we can’t step twice into the same river. We can’t do this because the river is constantly changing; it’s never the same. Mr. Spielberg reminds us that we also can’t step twice into the same river because we are constantly changing; we are never the same. This means that everything is always new—not just in the New Year but in every moment of our daily life!

Our scripture reading from the Book of Acts illustrates the theme of expectations and also the theme of healing. It speaks to our need for a faith-filled stance toward the uncertainty of the year that lies ahead. It reminds us that life will bring pain and suffering, but it will also bring unexpected gifts. This is the message of Christmas, our celebration of the unexpected gift of the birth of the Christ child in a lowly manger. This gift and many other gifts are God’s way of driving back the darkness that threatens to envelop us as individuals, as a nation, and as a world.

In our scripture reading, we encounter a man who is lame. His ailment appears to be attributable to a congenital weakness of his muscles because we are told he has been this way from birth. We could also take his physical condition as symbolic, as referring to something else, to a weakness or a limitation in the way he is approaching life. The exact nature of his disability isn’t important. For whatever reason, he is living his life as dis-abled and dependent.

The unnamed man, who has set up shop by the gate of the temple, earns his living by begging from those who enter. As Peter and John approach the temple, he makes his appeal. He hopes that Peter and John will give him money. However, he receives something quite different from that which he expected, something that is infinitely more valuable.

And Peter directed his gaze at him, with John, and said, “Look at us.” And he fixed his attention upon them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk.” And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and walked and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

This is an amazing story! The man asks for something to make his disability more bearable. What he receives is the power to overcome his disability, to be healed or made whole! Yes, God can truly surprise us!

When we read a biblical story, we can think of it as something that happened several thousand years ago. We can also think of it like a dream, as a story that tells us something about ourselves. When we look at it this way, all the people in the story are part of us.

If explore the part of ourselves that is like Peter and John, we may discover some of the resources we have to offer to others, that we have to offer to our church, that we have to offer to life. Peter and John were disciples, followers of Jesus who, after their encounter with the Holy Spirit, became apostles, people who carried the good news of God's healing love to the world. This is what we are called to be as Christians—both disciples and apostles, followers of Jesus and incarnations of Jesus' spirit in the world.

This is beautifully expressed at the end of the Gospel of Mark, in the passages that describe Jesus' ascension. Mark tells us that Jesus left his disciples and ascended into heaven. So, what happened after that? Mark tells us, "And they [the disciples] went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it." You see, Jesus wasn't gone. He was now present in the world *in and through* his apostles; he was working in the world through his apostles—as he now lives and works through us.

As disciples and apostles, we often set our expectations too low in what we expect from our faith and what we give. We offer gold and silver when we have the power to offer ourselves. Perhaps this is because we forget that Jesus is within us, that Jesus is working right along with us to bring healing and wholeness to a broken world. Scripture tells us that Jesus gave his disciples "authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity." If we live our life as individuals and as a church with an attitude of faith, even a measure as small as a grain of mustard seed, we will see miracles in our lives and in the lives of others!

We are like Peter and John, but we are also like the beggar—limited and in need of healing. The healing for which we long may be physical, a need to be healed of some illness or condition that keeps us from living a healthy and vital life. The healing for which we long may be emotional or relational--the need to be healed of some affliction that causes us pain or causes pain to others. The healing for which we long may be spiritual—the need to deepen our relationship with God and place God in the center of our life. When we identify with the beggar in the story, we come face to face with our own wounds, with our own need to be healed.

We all have our weaknesses and infirmities, the self-defeating attitudes and limiting self-concepts that cripple us. God has the desire and the power to heal us. Here is where our expectations can hold us back, especially if our expectations are too limited.

I know it sounds strange, but many Christians seem to have no expectations of God in relation to the healing which they desperately need. Is it because we really don't believe in God's healing power? We live our lives as if God didn't exist. We don't bring God into the depths of our relationships, our struggles and our conflicts. We don't utilize the resources of our faith when we are going through a difficult period in our life.

Of course, our expectations of God may be unrealistic. We may expect God to bail us out of every difficulty, to construct a life for us where pain, illness, tragedy, and death play no role. If we have these kinds of unrealistic expectations, then when God doesn't meet our expectations turned demands, we turn away angry and bitter, missing the gifts that we have actually been given, gifts that can help us not only survive but actually transcend the pain, the difficulty, the challenges we are experiencing.

If we look at the spiritual giants of the Bible, it is clear that God did not intend them to live a life of peace and tranquility. If God did not try to make *their* lives free of struggles and suffering, then why do we believe that this is the kind of life that God wills for *us*? God does not remove all burdens from our shoulders; rather, God gives us the resources we need to carry these burdens with grace. God also gives us unlimited opportunities for love, countless experiences of healing and moments of joy if we will only open our eyes and our hearts to experience them.

Think back to the beginning of this past year. Think of the hopes, the expectations you brought to the year you have just lived. I suspect that 2020 was not what you expected. Is it ever? I suspect it brought more pain and hardship than you anticipated. It may have brought more illness. It may even have brought the death of someone you loved.

And here we are—stepping forth into the New Year. As we enter into the New Year, we need to affirm our trust in that God who is the source, the sustaining power, and the end of all life. We need to draw strength and comfort from each other, for we might be the recipients of unexpected healing in the year to come, and we might be able to offer that healing message, that healing presence to others.

As we step forward into the New Year, into 2021, let us do so with hope. The hope that we bring to the year that lies ahead is based on more than wishful thinking. It is based on past experience. It is based on the realization that some wonderful things happened to us this past year. When we were struggling, someone unexpectedly reached out to us. When we were feeling alone, someone visited us. When we were discouraged, someone or perhaps even the scriptures spoke a word of hope. When we made a mess of our lives, someone forgave us. When we were going through a difficult time, we were sustained by the knowledge that people cared.

As we step forward into the New Year, let us try to remember not only the pain, but also all the wonderful things that happened this past year. Remember those moments when your life was touched by love. Recall those unexpected experiences of healing that took place. Discern how God's guiding, sustaining presence accompanied you on your journey.

The Gospel tells us we should face life with the eager expectation of the beggar by the temple gate. We should also remember that what we expect, what we think we want from life, may be quite different from what we receive. Life will not be what we expect: however, in some strange ways it may be better.

There were moments of sadness in our little church this past year. I am thinking of the passing of Don Jolie, Gilbert Joe, Rae Kay, and Bud Hubley. However, there were also moments of joy. I don't know how you could weigh them in a balance because the moments of sadness often give rise to moments of joy. Ultimately, the beautiful things that happen in this little community and in our lives are more powerful than the pain that we experience. At least they will be *if* we remember them.

Like Peter and John, we are called to be not only disciples but also apostles. We are called to give what we have, to share what we have with those who are in need. We are called to respond to the beggar who sits by the gate of the temple, to the member of a minority group, to the refugee, no matter where we encounter this person of great need in the year to come.

Like Peter and John, we can only give what we have. However, as scripture reminds us, we have a lot more than we know. Because we are more than we think we are, we have more to give than we realize. We may not only *receive* unexpected gifts in the year to come; *we ourselves* may be an unexpected gift. We may be or have or say exactly what someone needs, what our church needs, and what our world needs in the year to come.

I recently heard an example of this. This is apparently a true story.

A certain school system had a program to help children keep up with their schoolwork while they were hospitalized or home recovering from a hospitalization. This is called home-hospital tutoring; Darlene was a home-hospital tutor for the school system in Foxborough before she went into teaching English as a Second Language.

One day a teacher assigned to the home-hospital program received a call asking her to visit a particular child. She asked the child's homeroom teacher what she should focus on in their visits. The homeroom teacher said, "We are studying verb tenses and the proper use of the apostrophe. I'd be grateful if you could help him with these, so he doesn't fall too far behind."

When the teacher went to see the boy in the hospital that afternoon, she discovered that the boy had been so badly burned that he was hovering on the point of death. Realizing that he was in great pain, she stammered, "I've been sent by your homeroom teacher to help you with verb tenses and the use of the apostrophe." She did the best she could with a shortened lesson and left, feeling that she had accomplished little.

When the teacher returned to the hospital several days later, she was met by the head nurse. "What did you do to that boy?" the nurse asked. The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy. He seemed to have given up on life and lost the will to live. But ever since your visit, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, and he's finally responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

When the teacher asked the boy what had happened, he explained his change in attitude. He admitted that he had given up all hope of recovery because he thought that everyone had given up on him. However, after her visit, he came to a sudden realization. He expressed it this way: "The school system wouldn't send a teacher to work with verb tenses and the proper use of the apostrophe for a child who was dying, would they? That would be a waste of time and money. So apparently I am going to live!"

This story illustrates the theme of special and unexpected gifts. Never mind that there are problems with the way the boy understood what happened. When I think back to some of my high school English teachers, they would *absolutely* try to teach verb tenses to someone who was dying! Better late than never! I know English teachers that would teach grammar to someone on the verge of death. After all, if you are going to meet your Maker, it might be a good idea to get your act together! And what better place to start than demonstrating the proper placement of that pesky apostrophe, especially in the case of plural possessives? Instead of giving you a Bible or a prayer book, English teachers would be more apt to give you a copy of Strunk and White. They would also point out that a little alliteration doesn't hurt—not too much, just a little.

Seriously, however, the story reminds us that we never know the importance of what we bring to a conversation, the importance of the gift we may be giving to a person in a relationship, even in a visit. It is a reminder that we, you and I, can be a gift. It is a reminder that God can work in the world, that God does work for healing and wholeness through us. It is also a reminder that when we give, we also receive.

Let us step forward into the new year with the courage to embrace whatever it brings. Let us step forward with hearts that are open to the many gifts, the many moments of joy, the many moments of healing that, along with our pain and struggles, will be a part of this strange and wonderful journey in the year to come.

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." Let hope be born in you this Christmas; then share it with the world. Experience, and then *be* the peace that you can share with others and a world that desperately needs it. Receive the great gift of love, let it change you from within, and then share it with others and with life. Discover the joy that seeks you through pain, the joy that affirms the life that God has given you to live. In the year to come, answer God's call to do the "hard work" of Christmas, the hard work of being a follower of Jesus. Expect the unexpected. Above all, don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul