

**The First Community Church of Southborough
137 Southville Road
Southborough, Massachusetts 01772-1937**

The Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. – Pastor

www.firstcommunitychurch.com

Church: (508) 485-2607

Pastor: (508) 543-7160

Text: (508) 873-0534

Email: paulsandersonphd@gmail.com

February 28, 2021 – The Second Sunday in Lent

The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is also available in audio form on our "Pod Cast" site as part of a devotional service. To access it, click on the link at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 10:34-39

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. Lent is the liturgical period of forty days preceding Easter that is set aside to prepare ourselves for the celebration and, hopefully, also the personal experience of resurrection. This second dimension of Easter assumes, of course, that resurrection was not a once-for-all-time historical event. It certainly was part of Jesus' life; we have evidence of that. And it can be part of our life as well!

BTW, forty is an archetypal number signifying a time of trial, preparation, and also wholeness. It was the number of years that the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness during their Exodus from Egypt, and it was the number of days (and nights) Jesus spent in the wilderness following his baptism.

In our Lenten reflections this year, we are considering the process of moral development. We are drawing specifically from the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's studies on the stages of moral development, stages that were extrapolated from Jean Piaget's levels of cognitive development.

In our reflections, however, we are looking at this process from a slightly different perspective. We are examining the relationship of these stages to the development of what we might call a Christian ethics, a Christian morality, a Christian way of life. As I mentioned at the beginning of this series, this exploration is in response to what has been perceived as a moral vacuum in our country, a lack of moral vision, the lack of an ethical stance that is characteristic of many individuals and institutions even, or especially, at our nation's capital.

Two weeks ago, we considered the first level of moral development, the type of morality that is based simply on avoiding punishment. This is characteristic of young children who will obey parental rules to avoid a threatened consequence. Sad to say, there are adults who function on this very primitive moral level. The only reason they obey the law is because they fear the consequences of being caught and punished. If there were no danger of being caught and punished, they would indulge their immoral or illegal urges more often than they do.

I find it sad that the Christian church has grounded much of its moral teaching in this primitive stage of moral development. Throughout the millennia the church has basically treated us like children, employing the fear of hell to keep us in line. The

American theologian Jonathan Edwards, who preached at the time of the Great Awakening, is an example of this type of thinking. In his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Reverend Edwards presented his parishioners with a particularly graphic image.

Edwards told his parishioners to imagine that they are suspended over the eternal fires of hell, the realm of the devil and his angels, by a single thread, a single tenuous thread, the thread of Christ and his church. If you let go of this thread, *even for an instant*, you will be lost for all eternity! He then told them that this is not an image, a metaphor; this is actually where they are! I suspect that, following that sermon, attendance at Sunday worship increased significantly!

Unfortunately, many Christians have adopted this way of thinking. Those who believe they belong to the one-and-only true religion, the correct denomination and theological orientation pass judgment on the rest of us, on the meaningfulness of our religious beliefs, the quality of our relationship with God, and our spiritual journey. Their belief that they will go to heaven and we will go to hell after we die witnesses to their spiritual arrogance. I don't see any evidence that Jesus told people who did not believe as he did that they were doomed to suffer in hell for all eternity.

The second stage, which we explored last week, the stage that is characterized by reward obtaining, is not much better. Children in this stage obey parental rules to obtain a promised reward. If no reward is forthcoming, they feel no obligation to live by the rules. Parents of children this age often flip back and forth between rewards and punishments: sometimes punishing, sometimes rewarding. When children are young, this is not inappropriate; it is a way of teaching them the difference between right and wrong. It teaches them which behaviors are acceptable and which behaviors are unacceptable. It helps to socialize the child, which is an important parental responsibility. It is sad, however, when the motivation for living a moral or Christian life never progresses beyond this stage.

Mind you, I am not saying that there is no heaven or hell, either as a spiritual reality in this lifetime or something we experience after death. I believe there is a life after death, though I am a little fuzzy about what it is actually like. To be perfectly honest, I have absolutely no idea what really happens after we die. Nor am I particularly interested. As Thoreau has said, "One world at a time." Or as Santayana has said, "One real world is enough." Decisions about what happens to whom after we die are *way* above my pay level.

I'm not saying that heaven and hell are not meaningful concepts. All I am saying is that the focus on hell as a punishment and heaven as a reward is a pathetic reason *for living a Christian life*. It is not the best kind of grounding for a moral system. It assumes we are basically children or animals to be trained. It also assumes that the ultimate basis for our moral decisions is how the consequences of our behavior affect *us*. It is egocentric. This way of thinking is not characteristic of the way Jesus lived his life. Jesus made his life-shaping decisions and grounded his morality in a much higher authority than this!

The third stage, which Kohlberg calls "Good Boy – Good Girl," begins to take into consideration the needs and feelings of others. This level is characterized by mutual interpersonal expectations. It is more relational. In addition to a focus on one's actions, this stage also includes a consideration of one's intention, why one behaves as one does.

In this third stage, children and adolescents regard right and wrong in relation to what significant others expect of them. These expectations are shaped by the child's relationship or role with the significant other. In this stage, the significant other's approval is important. The child realizes that he/she can obtain the desired approval,

can maintain the desired relationship with the significant other by meeting the other's expectations.

In stage one, the child obeys the parent to avoid a spanking. In stage two, the child obeys the parent to obtain a reward. In stage three, the child wants the parent to think well of him/her, to think highly of him/her. For a child in this stage, the parent doesn't need to implement either punishments or rewards. The parent's *feelings* in general and the parent's *feelings toward the child* in particular are the determinative factors.

A prime example of a parent-child interaction that takes place on this third level is when the parent begins to use what has been called the "d-word" in his/her interaction with the child. Do you know what the "d-word" is? I'm sure we can all remember the moment when, for the first time, our mom or dad said to us, "I'm not *angry* about what you did; I'm just . . . *disappointed*." Yes, the "d-word" is "disappointed." If the child has grown into this third stage of moral development, the "d-word" carries a lot of weight!

Parents somehow know intuitively just how to verbalize this reprimand. You can't find guidelines for this particular verbal interaction in a book on parenting, but you really don't need it. You just *know* what to do. You have to pause at just the right moment for just the right length of time. "I'm not really *angry* at you for what you did; . . . I'm just . . . *disappointed*."

You have to say it in the right tone of voice, a tone that communicates the deep inner pain of disappointment. It should not convey anger. It should be accompanied by a sad look on your face and a slight dropping of the shoulders, as if you were discouraged as well as disappointed, as if you have failed to be a good parent to your child. You then turn and slowly walk away from the offending child, leaving him/her to struggle alone with his/her feelings of guilt.

When my parents used the "d" word with me, I think what hurt most was the realization that not only were they disappointed with my behavior; I had also made them feel like a failure as a parent. Because I had disappointed them, they were now disappointed in themselves. I felt bad about how I had hurt their feelings.

By the way, there is no easy escape from disappointment. If my mom or dad were angry with me, as soon as the anger blew over the relationship was restored to normal. But when your mother or father is disappointed in your behavior or in you as a person, can you ever recover what you have lost? How do you know when the rupture in the relationship has been healed? I preferred to have my parents place my hand on a hot stove than live for an extended period not knowing where I stood in relation to them, than to be punished by the implementation of the "silent treatment." (Actually, to be perfectly honest, they never really put my hand on a hot stove.)

By the time children enter school, if not before, they begin to define themselves in terms of their significant relationships with others. These significant relationships then begin to manifest or occur outside the family. Let me give you an example.

When I was in the sixth grade, my homeroom teacher was Mrs. Nolan. I loved Mrs. Nolan and Mrs. Nolan loved me. I mean, what was there not to love? I was one of the top three students in her class. I still harbor ambivalent feelings toward Karen Tongue and Joanne Warner, both of whom would occasionally obtain a higher grade than I on a paper or exam. I was polite and well behaved. I did my homework every night. And I loved to learn. As I said, what's not to like?

At the recess that followed lunch, my friends and I used to pitch baseball cards against the wall--either closer to the wall or "topsies" wins. One particular day we invented a variation of this game of skill (at which, to be perfectly honest, I was quite adept). We discovered that by not eating lunch, we could pitch the quarters our mothers gave us for lunch against the wall--closest to the wall wins. (My mother never realized

why I was so hungry when I came home from church every day—she just loved to give me milk and cookies.) However, on the day that will be forever etched in my memory, I lost seventy-five cents. It was not a good day.

When we returned to our classroom after recess, Mrs. Nolan was standing at the front of the class with her arms folded in front of her and a very unhappy look on her face. I knew something was wrong, but I had no idea what it was. When we were seated, Mrs. Nolan, in a very stern voice, told us that another teacher had called it to her attention that some of her students, some of *her* students, were gambling during recess. After a short pause, she asked all those who had gambled during recess to rise and stand beside their desks.

A series of thoughts raced through my young mind like lightning. I had never thought of pitching quarters as gambling, but when I thought about it, I supposed it technically was. To be sure, there was a certain skill set that enabled one to win at pitching quarters, just as there was a certain skill set that led to winning at pitching baseball cards. I guess I assumed that, since it was a game of skill, it was not really gambling.

Then I realized that the people who play poker or blackjack at casinos also employ a certain skill set—the skill of counting cards or knowing when to be hit and when to stay. However, no matter how *I* understood what I had done, no matter how *I* understood the relationship between skill, chance, and fate in gambling, the bottom line was that *Mrs. Nolan* said that what we did was gambling, and Mrs. Nolan, my teacher, was always right.

I briefly considered not identifying myself as one of the miscreants. But we had a small school. Every single teacher in our school knew every single student. The teacher who told Mrs. Nolan about the gambling might have given her our names. If I lied to Mrs. Nolan and got caught, I would be doubly screwed. So, I quietly rose to my feet and stood beside my desk.

Mrs. Nolan then said she was going to teach us a lesson about gambling. She said that everyone who had won money that day should come forward and put his winnings in a jar she had placed on her desk. I say “his” winnings, though this is not politically correct, but, as a point of fact, only boys played these games during recess. I have no idea what girls did during recess, nor did I care; I was in the sixth grade. The money that Mrs. Nolan collected from those of us who were not only sinners, but also successful sinners, would be given to a charity of Mrs. Nolan’s choosing.

This isn’t really the point, but, to this day, I am not sure what lesson Mrs. Nolan wanted us to learn. Was it that whatever you win at gambling will be taken away from you? But this isn’t always true, though it is true most of the time. Was it that it is more important to help other people than throw away your money at a casino? But I already knew this. After all, I was only pitching baseball cards and quarters. I doubt if Mrs. Nolan is still alive; I think she was already ancient when I was in the sixth grade, but if she is, I would love to ask her. The lesson she intended to impart to us is one of the great unresolved questions in my life. However, as I said, this isn’t really the point. Once again, a series of thoughts raced through my head like lightning. I knew I had lost seventy-five cents that day, but I didn’t want my classmates to think of me as a loser. So, I slowly walked forward and placed an additional fifty cents in the jar. I suspect that deep down (a psychologist might say unconsciously), I might have also thought that if I built in a little self-inflicted punishment, the fates might prevent Mrs. Nolan from punishing me further.

Mrs. Nolan didn’t need to punish me. She didn’t make me stay after school to clap the erasers or write “I will never gamble again” one hundred times on the blackboard. As I placed the money in the jar and turned to return to my desk, Mrs.

Nolan looked at me and slowly shook her head. All she said was, "Paul Sanderson, my prize pupil."

That's all that Mrs. Nolan said. That's all, but it was enough! It was as if she had stuck a knife into my heart and twisted it. I had let my teacher down! I had also lost my special status, since Karen and Joanne were too goody-goody to pitch quarters. I suspected they were secretly delighted that I had fallen from grace. (I will have to ask them the next time I attend a class reunion.) That little event happened in 1954, approximately sixty-seven years ago. I remember it and the attendant feelings as if it had happened yesterday.

The only good to come out of this painful experience is that, in retrospect, I can conclude that at least by the time I was in the sixth grade, I had reached the third stage of Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development. However, throughout the years, this has not proved to be a major source of comfort.

The positive aspect of this stage of moral development, the third stage, the Good Boy – Good Girl stage, is that it builds upon what Sigmund Freud would call the child's super-ego; it is grounded in the child's internalized conscience. If we are in this stage, we don't need to be punished or rewarded to keep us in line. We know what it means to be a good son or daughter, a good sixth-grade student. And we care enough about the significant other, about the parent or the teacher, about their feelings in general and their feelings toward us in particular, to need no other parameters for our behavior. We want to do what will make the significant adults in our life happy and proud of us. We don't want to do anything that might make them unhappy or sad, anything that might make them feel like a failure. Above all, we don't want them to be disappointed in us.

The negative aspect of this stage has to do with the matter of idolatry. In this stage, we unconsciously make a person, admittedly a very significant person, into God. We define ourselves, derive our feelings of self-worth, and construct our moral code in relation to a limited, wounded, unenlightened, misguided, and sometimes disturbed or even mentally ill human being. This is what happens when a child grows up with a parent who is a perfectionist. It is difficult for a child with a perfectionistic parent to get the feeling that he/she ever meets the parent's high standards for acceptance. The child, turned adult, always feels like a failure, always feels *existentially* guilty. For example, a parent might want his/her child to take over the family business. The child/teenager/college student does not want to do so. It is not the path to which the child feels called. It is not what the child wants to do with his/her life. However, the child cannot allow him/herself to individuate from the parent because to do so would hurt the parent's feelings. So, the child spends his/her life not living out his/her own dream, but rather the aspirations, desires, and even unfulfilled dreams, the un-lived life of the parent. I don't think this is what God would want us to do.

I am sorry to say that the power of this particular stage of moral development has caused untold suffering within so-called "Christian" marriages. I have worked with many women and a few men in my counseling practice who were trapped in abusive relationships by what they believed is demanded of a Christian spouse. Some drew their understanding of marriage from the teaching of the church, specifically its condemnation of divorce. In the Roman Catholic Church, people who divorce and remarry without having the first marriage annulled are not permitted to receive communion. This is true no matter how bad the first marriage was, how abusive or lacking in love, or how loving the second marriage is. Other people have been trapped by a literal interpretation of certain passages of scripture, passages that are not read or seen in their cultural context. Neither way of thinking is in the service of individuation.

I know I am speaking as an introvert, but I don't think Jesus wants us to define ourselves in relation to any other person. I don't think Jesus wants us to spend our lives

trying to make another person happy or to prevent another person from being unhappy, whether that person is our mother, our father, our husband or our wife. In a truly loving relationship, of course we will want the person we love to be happy, and we will want to make the person happy. But we do not *define ourselves* in the context of a codependent relationship. We do not judge ourselves to be a failure on the basis of our inability to meet the other person's expectations, for the other person's expectations may be distorted and self-serving. This would be the case if you happen to have a narcissistic parent or spouse. To judge yourself by such a person's standards would be to engage in idolatry, to make that person into a god.

That is my problem with the passage in Ephesians 5:22, where the apostle Paul writes,

"Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church." I have heard this passage quoted by Christian husbands in the context of marital counseling, and I have heard it quoted by Christian wives who try their best to live by it, but just can't understand why they are so depressed! Paul's teaching is echoed in the First Letter of Peter to the early church, chapter 3, verses 1-4:

Likewise, you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, when they see your reverent and chaste behavior. Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of fine clothing, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.

I know women who have not only psychologically but literally *died* in this kind of marriage, trying to win their husband to Christ by being submissive. The staff of Abby's House, our mission recipient for March, have heard many of these stories. I also know of many women who were unable to stand up to their husband's abusive treatment of the children because "the husband is the head of the family," and who feel terribly guilty decades later about not protecting their children from a style of parenting that was not only unenlightened but physically and psychologically damaging. They knew it was wrong when it was happening, but because of their "religious beliefs" they had no place to stand to fight it out.

Jesus values family. Yet he does not afford family the highest value. He does not want us to define ourselves in terms of familial or parental relationships, especially when this leads us to think of ourselves or to have feelings toward ourselves that are inconsistent with how God feels about us. Jesus says,
Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; . . .
(Matthew 10:34-39)

The Roman Catholic Church maintains that Jesus was an only child, despite several passages of scripture that not only mention but actually name his biological brothers. Most Protestants believe he was the oldest child in the family but not the only child. The literal virginity of Mary is not of much importance to most Protestants. Whether he was the only child or the oldest child, in the culture within which Jesus lived, his role in life would have been determined by the needs of his family of origin. If his father Joseph died when Jesus was young, as legend suggests, Jesus

would have stayed home to take care of his mother and his younger siblings. Yet he did not do so. No matter what his family thought of him, no matter what other people thought of him, he set out on the path to which he believed he was called by God.

Jesus refused to be defined by his relationships, by his social responsibilities, by his sensitivity to the feelings and even the needs of others. I am sure that he loved his mother very much, that he loved his brothers and sisters very much. Yet we read in Matthew 12:46-50:

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak with him. (In another translation, it indicates that they came to "get" him.) But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother."

It is interesting that at the time of his enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama, who was to become the Buddha, was assailed by three temptations, just as Jesus was assailed with three temptations in the wilderness following his baptism.

The first temptation, the first attempt of Mara (the equivalent of Satan) to divert Siddhartha from his path was the lure of pleasure. Mara sent legions of beautiful dancing girls to distract Siddhartha from his meditation. But Siddhartha knew that the beauty he could see in the maidens was ephemeral, that they would soon be rotting corpses, and he was not diverted from his path.

The second tactic employed was that of fear. Mara sent clouds of demons to frighten Siddhartha. The demons threw spears and shot arrows at the young man who was silently sitting in meditation. But Siddhartha knew that this too was an illusion. His realization turned the arrows and spears into flowers that rained down upon him.

The third temptation was the call of duty. Siddhartha grew up in a country and a culture that was built upon the caste system. People were defined by the caste into which they were born. Their responsibilities in life were clearly delineated by their caste and by their family responsibilities. Once again, Siddhartha resisted the temptation to let his family's needs, or the cultural mores of his society, define him. He remained sitting in meditation until he became enlightened. Then, like Jesus, he set out to teach others what he had learned: how to experience their own inner divinity, their own Buddha nature.

If we go back to the Litany of the Person that appears at the beginning of this week's Keeping in (Virtual) Touch newsletter/reflection, a litany written by the monks of the Abbey of Gethsemani, I think we can grasp how God sees us. The litany assures us that we are unique creations. We are incarnations of God's creative Spirit. We are precious to God, as precious as the Prodigal Son was to his father. God wants us to be ourselves fully and uniquely; that is all God desires. If we were to use Jungian concepts to describe this, we might say that God calls us forth into the (sometimes messy) journey of individuation, and that God is present in the unfolding of our life.

Once we grasp this, the threat of punishment and the promise of reward ceases to become a factor in the way we live our life. We begin to move at least to stage three: the stage of relationship. It is not that we fear God's wrath; we just don't want to disappoint God. We don't want to do anything that damages this precious relationship. Do we mess up on this difficult journey through the labyrinthian maze of this earthly life? I don't know about you, but I certainly have! There are times when all of us make a mess out of the life that has been handed to us. However, because I believe I have reached at least the third stage of moral development (as evidenced in my sixth-grade experience), I don't need to fear the fires of hell to keep me on the straight and

narrow. Nor do I need the promise of reward. What is important is not the punishment or the reward but *the relationship*—the most important relationship in my life. When I pray (which is not as often as I should), I talk to Jesus. This is because I think of Jesus more as a friend than an object of worship. Yes, I like the old-time hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” When I have thought something or said something or done something that is not consistent with my understanding of the life to which Jesus calls me, Jesus doesn’t have to threaten me. All he has to say is, “Paul, I think you know better than that.” That is enough. Shadows of Mrs. Nolan. There is one difference, however. Jesus’ reminder to live a life that is congruent with the way of life to which I call others in my teaching and preaching takes place in the context of a forgiving, all-embracing love!

Jesus tells us that he came that we might have life and have it abundantly. The way to have life and have it abundantly is for each of us to become unique, special incarnations of God’s creative Spirit--no matter what life brings our way.

The great Jewish (existential?) theologian Martin Buber, in one of his writings, shared a quote from Rabbi Zusha of Hanipol. Rabbi Zusha, a devout Orthodox rabbi, early Hasidic luminary, and well-known tzaddik of the 18th century, was known for his deep emotional approach toward prayer and his great piety.

When Rabbi Zusha was on his deathbed, his students found him in uncontrollable tears. They tried to comfort him by telling him that, since he was almost as wise as Moses and almost as kind as Abraham, he was sure to obtain entrance into heaven. Rabbi Zusha replied, “When I get to heaven, I will not be asked ‘Why weren’t you more like Moses?’ or ‘Why weren’t you more like Abraham?’ I will be asked, ‘Why weren’t you more like Rabbi Zusha?’”

God doesn’t want us to be more like Moses or Abraham or Jesus or Buddha or Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa. God simply wants us to be ourselves fully and uniquely as children of God. This is the greatest, the most important contribution we can make to the ongoing evolution of God’s creation. It is also an extremely difficult challenge!

There is more to morality than being a good son or daughter, a good sixth-grade student, a good husband or wife, a good mother or father. A deeper core of morality has to do with who we are as children of God. The deepest core of morality is grounded in this relationship.

As we continue our journey through Lent and then throughout the Easter season, let us discover what Jesus would teach us about the life that God would have us lead. If we can discover the moral grounding that served as the basis for Jesus’ life, we might be able to enter more fully into not only his death and resurrection but our own, *for there are parts of us that need to die so something new can emerge*. Then we will discover the true meaning of Easter.

As we journey forth into this sacred liturgical season of Lent, let us pray that the light within us and the light that we can bring to a darkened world will never go out.