

**The First Community Church of Southborough
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March 7, 2021 – The Third Sunday in Lent

The Fifty-Sixth Anniversary of Bloody Sunday, which took place at the Edmund Petis Bridge in Selma, Alabama

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.

Worship Service Music

The Prelude for this week's audio (Pod Cast) devotional service is "Aase's Death" from the *Peer Gynt Suite* by the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg. Grieg (1843-1907) wrote this piece in 1875 as incidental music to Henrik Ibsen's 1876 play *Peer Gynt*. It premiered along with the play on 24 February 1876 in Christiania (now Oslo).

Scripture Lessons: Ephesians 6:1-9
Matthew 22:15-22

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 15:21)

Today is the third Sunday in Lent and the fourth in our series on levels of moral development from a Christian perspective. It is also the first anniversary of the first Sunday that we suspended meeting as a gathered church in our sanctuary for worship and, on the first Sunday of every month, for the Sacrament of Holy Communion. I can't believe it has really been a year since we have been together!

The first two weeks in our series we examined the first two stages in Lawrence Kohlberg's levels of moral development: the punishment-avoidant stage and the reward-obtaining stage. In these stages the child acts in a responsible manner to avoid a punishment or to obtain a reward. The child has no bigger vision than this. The Christian version of this level is when a person's commitment to living a moral or Christian life is grounded in the desire to escape the fires of hell or go to heaven after he/she dies. For both children and adults, these two stages are basically egocentric. The focus is on what a particular action will or will not do for *me*.

The third stage, which we explored last week, is grounded in relationships. In this stage, which Kohlberg called "Good Boy--Good Girl," the child acts in a moral or responsible manner because it is expected of him/her by a significant other, usually a loved and/or feared adult. A child or adult whose moral development is characteristic of this stage cares about the feelings of others. You not only want to be thought of as a good son or

good daughter; there is an intrinsic satisfaction that comes when you can honestly view yourself in this light.

This is where it gets a little tricky. Although the other person's feelings and judgment are important to us, it doesn't follow that we should automatically judge ourselves by the other person's standards. Let me give you an example.

Many years ago, in fact, fifty years ago when I was the Protestant Chaplain at Foxborough State Hospital, there was a patient on the geriatric unit who suffered from both chronic mental illness and either dementia or Alzheimer's disease. When I would visit her, she had difficulty remembering who I was. She also had no recollection of my previous visit or visits.

Her son, who served as the pastor of an evangelical church in our area, visited his mother every single day. This impressed me. You don't often see that in a state mental hospital. Many families seem to "forget" about their loved one when they are admitted to a place like ours. One day I asked him if his mother knew who he was. He said she did about 50% of the time. I asked if she remembered his visits. He said she never remembered his visits and would often reprimand him for not visiting her more often. Yet he spent about an hour with her every single day.

During the last year of her life, when she was bedridden and practically comatose, her son continued to visit her daily. He always brought a dish of ice cream he had purchased at the Dairy Queen across the street from the hospital and fed her while she lay in bed. She not only never retained the memory of this beautiful act of love; she probably didn't even realize that it was her son who was feeding her.

When I asked him about this, he said that it didn't matter to him whether his mother knew what he was doing. He knew what it meant to be a good son. He knew what he had to do in the context of this very special but now very limited relationship. Whether his mother or anyone else knew what he was doing, he knew. (Of course, I suspect that God also knew.) When his mother died, he probably felt sad--but he should definitely not feel guilty.

There are times when we have to unilaterally set healthy boundaries or define the terms of the relationship as the context or grounding for the expectations that we place on ourselves or allow others to place upon us. Last week we looked at some of the abuses of this stage that arise from people who feel trapped in a verbally, emotionally, and physically abusive relationship by a distortion of Christian teaching, by a distortion of Christian values.

Jesus valued marriage and family, but he did not want anyone to offer him/herself on the altar of marriage as a human sacrifice. Although Jesus and his disciples lived as responsible citizens within their society, within their culture, they did not define themselves by social roles or expectations. As I mentioned last week, this was true of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, as well. Jesus said that in the service of individuation, a son might have to do battle with his father, a daughter with her mother, and that our enemies, those who stand in the way of our self-actualization, the fulfillment of our destiny as a child of God, may turn out to be those of our own household. Actually, they not only *may*, they often *are* those of our own household!

By the way, this matter of having our core identity shaped by "those of our own household," to use Jesus' words, is not restricted to actual living household members. Psychologists who specialize in what is called Internal Family Systems have discovered that we carry within us the dynamics that we experienced in our family of origin long after we have physically moved away from our parents or they have even passed away. Traditional psychoanalytic theory maintains that to become yourself fully, you need to both separate and individuate from your family of origin. You need to physically separate yourself from your parents; you need to move away from home. You

also need to individuate; you need to become your own person, not a carbon copy of either of your parents, and not blindly observant of the rules for living that they taught you as a child.

Let me give you another example of stage #3. Several of you who are listening to or reading this reflection have served in the armed forces. I have not done so, but I do know something about it from watching Audie Murphy movies when I was younger. Those of you who have served in the armed forces know the answer to the following question: If you are captured by the enemy and are detained in a prisoner-of-war camp, what information about yourself are you allowed to give to your captors? That's right: your name, rank, and serial number. Nothing more. There is a reason for this. After a few months of living on a subsistence diet, the prison commandant might call you in and say, "Paul, how would you like to have a nice meal?" Being very hungry, you say, "I would like that very much." The commandant says, "In order to get a nice meal, all you have to do is give us some personal information about Mike." If your level of moral development has not risen above stage #1 or stage #2, the desire to increase pleasure and decrease pain, you will tell them that Mike has a wife and little baby son back home. They thank you and give you a nice meal.

Then they call Mike in. They say, "Mike, how would you like to be released from this prison? How would you like to go home and see your wife and baby son? We can make this happen. All you have to do is tell us something about Corey and Jay. Also, we would like you to let us know when the next escape attempt will take place." The prison guards use this kind of personal information to turn the prisoners against each other, thus undermining morale, trust, social cohesiveness, discipline, and plans to escape.

John McCain was never my first choice to be president, but I had tremendous respect for him as a person. Other than a brief period when, probably under the advice of his political consultants, he kissed up to Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell to garner the conservative evangelical vote, and his misguided selection of Sarah Palin as a running mate in 2008, I regarded him as a man of integrity.

As you know, John McCain was incarcerated in a prisoner-of-war camp in Vietnam. He was brutally tortured. From what I understand, when his captors learned that his father was an admiral or some other high-ranking officer in the Navy, they offered to release him from the camp.

If John McCain's level of moral development was at stage #1 or stage #2, he would have jumped at the opportunity. By walking out the door he would have increased his pleasure and decreased his pain. His decision not to leave until *all his men* were released subjected him to additional years of imprisonment and torture. But John McCain knew what it meant to be a good soldier, and he knew what it meant to be a good commander. Because he defined himself by these roles, because they were core parts of his identity, he refused to engage in any behavior that was inconsistent with these roles, no matter how much it might benefit him as an individual. I still have tremendous respect for this man. We need more Republicans like him in the Senate. In stage #4 we begin to think even a little bigger. Stage #4, known as "Authority Maintenance" or "System Maintenance," is built on the realization that we are a part of a group; we are part of a society. To be sure, we are individuals who are sons or daughters, sixth-grade students, husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, or soldiers. But we are also part of a much bigger whole. This realization, accompanied by our desire to live within our society, should shape our behavior.

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant has given us a moral directive that is grounded in this stage. According to Kant's categorical imperative,

before we engage in a certain behavior, we should ask ourselves the following question: would we like to live in a society where everyone not only has the opportunity to do this, but where everybody does this? Kant pushes this even a step further. As a categorical *imperative*, this would be a society where everyone *has* to do this. Let me give you an example.

Early in the morning twice a week for twenty-five years, I drove from my home in Foxborough to Assumption College in Worcester by Routes #495 and #290. I like Route #495, but I really like Route #290. It's a pretty road with trees and fields and a nicely landscaped center strip.

Because I am a little obsessive compulsive about neatness, I like to keep my car, especially the front seat area, neat and clean. When I finished the cup of coffee that I purchased from Dunkin Donuts at the very beginning of my twice weekly journey, I confess that I was tempted to keep the front area neat by chucking the empty cup out the window. What prevented me from doing this? (Yes, I did restrain from doing so, and I'll tell you why.)

If my decision were grounded in stage #1, punishment avoidance, the issue would be whether or not I would be caught and fined for littering. But I could be discreet about disposing of the cup, making sure there were no state police cruisers behind me, so the fear of punishment did not weigh heavy on my mind.

If my decision were grounded in stage #2, reward obtaining, the realization that throwing my trash out the window would increase my pleasure since the "cockpit" of my car would be neat would incentivize me to dump the cup. (I still think it is somewhat presumptuous to speak of a "cockpit" in a 2008 Volvo sedan with 175,000 miles on it, but that's what they are calling it nowadays.)

Stage #3 doesn't really apply in this example since the decision has nothing to do with a particular person or relationship. People whose moral development has not progressed beyond these three stages might ditch their trash. People whose level of moral development has reached stage #4 would not. Why?

Immanuel Kant tells me that before I throw the cup out the window I should think: would I like to live in a society where everyone threw his/her trash out the window? The answer to this question is no! Route #290 would be a garbage heap! I also don't like the option of hiring hundreds of people to constantly walk the road picking up the trash that we discard. Kant would say, "If you don't want to live in a society where everyone does it, don't you do it."

Immanuel Kant is reminding us that we are a part of a society, that we are members of a bigger group, and that we have certain moral obligations as members of this group. He is calling us to set aside our narcissism and abandon the egocentric notion that it's all about us. Kant tells us not to think of ourselves as exceptions to the rule. If everyone did this, our society would break down. No one would benefit from that.

You are stopped at a traffic light and no one is coming from any direction. Are you tempted to drive through the red light? Yes (at least I am, or I am honest enough to admit that I am sometimes tempted to do so). Do you drive through the red light? No. Why don't you do this? According to Kant's categorical imperative, we should ask whether we would like to live in a society where everyone decides which, if any, traffic rules they will obey. That kind of arbitrary adherence to traffic rules and regulations, e.g., regarding which side of the road we drive, would result in chaos and the loss of a tremendous number of lives. So, we wait patiently for the light to change. I might not think it is a big deal to shoplift a magazine from CVS. However, if everyone did this, CVS would go bankrupt or else guards armed with AK47 rifles would be stationed at the end of every aisle ready to blow away anyone suspected of

shoplifting. This isn't the way I want to shop. Even if I were not shoplifting, I would not want to become collateral damage.

You might not think it is a big deal to cheat on your income tax. However, if everyone did this, our total economy would be in ruins. We know of countries, e.g., Venezuela, where the tax system is a dumpster fire that basically benefits the wealthy. If you don't want to live in a society like that, don't cheat on your taxes.

Despite what I was taught in my social ethics courses in the theological school, Jesus wasn't an opponent of the existing social order. He wasn't an anarchist. He said, with regard to taxes, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." I believe that Jesus didn't want to undermine or destroy the social order; he just wanted to help it evolve in more compassionate ways.

The apostle Paul told his parishioners that slaves should be submissive to their masters. At the same time, Paul calls us to a bigger vision of a society where there is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free. He tells us that, in Christ, there is only love. In Christ, Paul says that husbands would love their wives as their own bodies. How, then, would a loving husband, a Christian husband, abuse his wife?

We have an obligation not only to ourselves, our family and friends, our tribe or clan, our group loyalties, but to all people. We are responsible for maintaining the society in which we live. What we do affects others. Because we are all interconnected, what we do has a profound effect upon others.

Think about the environment. This is a moral issue. We have a responsibility to care for our environment. If we dump our plastic in the oceans, it may not affect us personally, but it will affect right whales and other marine life. If, through our dependence on fossil fuels we contribute to global warming, it may not affect us directly, but it definitely will affect our children and grandchildren. Stage #4 would tell us that we not only have a responsibility to the human beings that currently cohabit our planet; we have a responsibility to future generations as well.

Stage #4 challenges us to think big! It reminds us of our deep interconnectedness with all people. It challenges us to think of others in addition to ourselves. Just as Jesus called us to expand our concept of neighbor to include Samaritans, just as Paul called us to dissolve the superficial boundaries between Jew and Gentile, between slave and free, the Buddhists challenge us to extend this sense of responsibility, this love and compassion to *all sentient beings*. The deeper we go into God, the more deeply we find ourselves connected with others, with our earth, and with all life.

This teaching about the interconnectedness of all life, in fact, of *everything*, is consistent with the insights of contemporary physics. Quantum mechanics has proven that it is not possible to be an objective, detached observer in a scientific (or sociological or psychological) experiment (or, by the way, in a psychotherapeutic relationship). Maxwell's three-slit experiment shows us that the presence of the observer, even if the observer is a recording device, changes the field that underlies both the observer and the observed; thus, the observer and the observation change the behavior of the observed. This is true on the level of what we have traditionally called fundamental "particles," a category that is becoming increasingly difficult to grasp/picture. As the nuclear physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer has said, *If we ask, for instance, whether the position of the electron remains the same, we must say "no;" if we ask whether the electron's position changes with time, we must say "no;" if we ask whether the electron is at rest, we must say "no;" if we ask whether it is in motion, we must say "no."*

This confusing statement brings to mind a statement by the French poet, essayist, and philosopher Paul Valery (1871-1945), who was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in twelve different years. I don't know much about him, but I have found myself drawn to the following quotes taken from his writings:

A poem is never finished, only abandoned.

and

The best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up.

and

Love is being stupid together.

I particularly like the last one! But that's not the point. The quote I have in mind is the following:

God made everything out of nothing. But the nothingness shows through.

Admittedly, it is difficult to picture a massless particle. However, the insights of quantum field theory were articulated many years ago by the Buddhist masters. The Mahayana text, *The Heart Sutra*, which holds a preeminent place in Zen, tells us,

Form is no different from emptiness.

Emptiness is no different from form.

Form is precisely emptiness,

emptiness is precisely form.

Both Buddhism and quantum physics teach us that a fundamental particle is not a separate entity; "it" is a set of relationships. The world is an interconnected tissue of events, a dynamic unbroken whole. This is why scientists are no longer observers but participants. As the modern physicist H. P. Stapp notes,

An elementary particle is not an independently existing, unanalyzable entity. It is, in essence, a set of relationships that reach outward to other things.

If this is true of elementary "particles," might it not also be true of us? Is this what Jesus and Paul were trying to tell us in their efforts not so much to *break down* but to actually *see through* the emptiness of the walls that divide us, a "seeing through" that *dissolves* these walls? As Gary Zukov in *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters*, has said, *A powerful awareness lies dormant in these discoveries [of modern physics]: an awareness of the hitherto-unsuspected powers of the mind to mold "reality," rather than the other way around. In this sense the philosophy of physics is becoming indistinguishable from the philosophy of Buddhism, which is the philosophy of enlightenment.*

We know that the "reality" of the outside world molds us. Think of the effect that our parents, our family of origin has on the development of our personality. However, Gary Zukov challenges us to think about, as he puts it, "the hitherto-unsuspected powers of the mind to mold reality." Might it be that this is how we can change society? Might it be that this is how we can change the world? What if it all starts with changing us, especially with changing our hearts?

Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative is applicable to church membership. Ask yourself: if everyone attended Sunday worship as faithfully as I, would we continue to have Sunday worship? If everyone in this church pledged what I pledge, would the doors of our church remain open? If everyone claimed the freedom not to serve on a board or committee, not to help out with coffee hours, yard sales or fairs, how would our

church function? Think: would we like to be members of a church where everyone's level of commitment matched ours? What would we be leaving to future generations? We are individual people in this church, but we are not just individual people. We are part of a family. We are not just isolated people attending Sunday worship. God knows we could do that by staying home on Sunday mornings and switching on the television. But we are part of a community. We are all interconnected. We are members, one of another, and we are also part of a bigger whole, a bigger energy field: what Paul calls the mystical body of Christ.

One final example of the importance of growing into at least stage #4. Think about the pandemic restrictions. I may not like to wear a mask, socially distance, wash my hands, refrain from eating in restaurants, eschew family gatherings, and not attend worship in our beautiful sanctuary as the gathered church. Kant would ask me whether I would like to live in a society where no one follows the CDC guidelines. Even with these guidelines, to which our response has been spotty or ambivalent at best, we in the United States have lost over 500,000 lives to COVID-19. What would this number be if everyone thought of him/herself alone? Whether we wear a mask, and whether we receive the vaccination, *affects others*. It is not simply about us!

I am aware when I say this that the governors of Texas and Mississippi, who are removing all pandemic restrictions in their states in an effort to return to "normal," may not yet have reached stage #4 in their own moral development. With the coronavirus variants from Great Britain, South Africa, and Brazil already circulating in our country, I am deeply concerned that a lot of innocent people in Texas and Mississippi (and also beyond) are going to suffer serious consequences or die from the inability of people to make personal sacrifices for the common good. I wonder what the rate of vaccination is going to be in these two states, and how it will affect our ability to reach herd immunity in this country.

Xander Bogaerts, who emigrated to this country from Aruba, recently articulated his motivation for strictly observing COVID-19 safety protocols. For those of you reading or listening to this reflection who are women, I just want to explain to you that Xander Bogaerts is the shortstop of the Boston Red Sox baseball team. I know what some of you are thinking; many of my politically correct, tree-loving, socialist-hugging liberal friends will accuse me of mansplaining here. I really am not; I am just trying to be helpful. But that's not the point. Xander (a .300-hitting shortstop who is currently suffering from a sore right shoulder, an item of concern to Red Sox fans) was quoted in the February 28 *Boston Globe* as saying,

Just be professional. Don't always think on yourself. Think on, as normal people would say, your neighbor. Think on the guy next door. Think on the coaching staff and front office. Those are older guys, guys that have a higher age group than we have, you know?

He went on to say

I know we're young. Sometimes we think we're invincible or nothing can touch us because we're so young. This virus, you never know with it. Just try to keep yourself safe but mostly the elderly ones that are always around here. It can be coaching staff, front office, ownership group, whatever. Just try to think on them before you do something, I would say, stupid.

Apart from the reference to "us" as being so young and in such great shape that we are convinced we're invincible, I totally agree with Xander. Xander has definitely reached stage #4! Let's take care of those elderly guys! Let's not do anything stupid!

This is the season of Lent. Lent challenges us to think bigger. It calls us to give up something, to sacrifice our primitive inclination to increase personal pleasure and decrease personal pain on the altar of Christian discipleship. It calls us to think past our own needs to the needs of our families, to think past the needs of our families to the needs of others. It calls us to give to missions. It reminds us that we are all interconnected, that we are a part of a larger family to which we have responsibilities as well. It calls us into that bigger vision that formed the inner directive of Jesus' life--that deeper love that led him to lay down his life for us.

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 in 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.