

**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

March 14, 2021 – The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Worship Service Music

The Prelude for this week's devotional service is a Gregorian Chant: "Hosanna filio David," which is taken from an Angel recording entitled *Chant*. This antiphonal is chanted by the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos, an abbey in the village of Santo Domingo de Silos in the southern part of Burgos Province in northern Spain. The monastery is named after the eleventh-century saint Dominic of Silos.

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 on the Home page or at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lessons: Romans 13:1-10
Matthew 22:34-40

"The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not kill; You shall not steal; You shall not covet;' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." (Romans 13:10)

What a beautiful week this has been! In the early morning, when I walk our dog, Brie, the songs of birds that are beginning to break the silence of what feels like a long, cold winter are newly accompanied by the honking of flocks of geese flying overhead on their way north. The days this past week have been beautifully warm and sunny. The snow is slowly but steadily melting. Despite predictions for a cold snap this coming week, we are finally beginning to taste spring. Just in time for Easter! Oh rats! The United Parishes of Southborough Easter sunrise service by the side of the lake in Hopkinton and our own Easter Sunday worship service will not be held again this year; we are still in lockdown mode out of an abundance of caution, care, and compassion. Oh well, I suppose we can celebrate Easter and experience the power of the resurrection in other ways this year. Yes, that is indeed the challenge!

Today is the day that we shift to Daylight Savings Time. With all the crises besetting us in our country and around the world, I confess that I fail to muster much ire or dogmatic indignation regarding the debate about whether we should adjust our clocks to allow more early morning light (and earlier darkness) during the winter months, or just leave it on Daylight Savings Time all year round. I basically like it the way it presently is—with the change of our clocks in the fall and the spring. One of the benefits of "springing ahead" an hour on the Sunday before the beginning of spring is that, since we are

always in church the day immediately following the change of our clocks, I get a chance to tease our church organist/pianist/choir director Michael Larson. It's not that I actually tease him (though, actually, I do). During the announcements, I usually say something like, "It's good to have you with us today, Michael." Michael, seated at the organ, generally smiles, looks down at the keyboard, and makes no response. Once in a while he has said, "Thank you, Paul. It's good to be here." But he knows very well why I am saying this, as do a handful of our long-term members. One Sunday, I believe it was twenty years ago, Michael, who had probably played piano bar the preceding night into the wee hours of the morning, apparently forgot to set his clock ahead. On that particular Sunday morning, as we neared the magic hour of 11:00 a.m., the sacred time for worship that our church alone still observes, I realized what was happening—or not happening. It was 10:45 a.m. and Michael was nowhere in sight. Since I didn't have a suitable prelude piece on hand, and since I had no time to practice one anyway, ten minutes before the worship service was scheduled to begin I sat down at the piano and began to play and improvise a little on some of our favorite old-time hymns. As I played, I began to consider how I could make this work—going back and forth between the lectern and pulpit in the front of the church and the piano in the back for the entire service—or at least until Michael showed up. Nowadays, thanks to the gift of a beautiful Mason Hamlin grand piano from David Park, a recent Friend of the Church, a piano that has found a home right in front of the lectern, this would be easier to pull off. As I sat at the piano playing, planning, and considering whether I should ask the church treasurer to pay me for fulfilling the roles of both minister and pianist/organist that Sunday, Michael walked in. Sheepishly, deeply chagrined, he quietly took his place at the organ, and I, quite honestly relieved, relinquished my seat at the piano and walked forward to the chancel.

I suppose I should let this go. After all, it *has* been twenty years. Then again, how often does fate hand you the opportunity on a silver platter to tease someone once a year *forever*, or at least as long as Michael and I serve First Community Church together? I know it probably isn't very "Christian" of me to remind Michael, my good friend, of his lone calendrical and temporal lapse year after year, but I confess I look forward every year to doing so. I am not proud of this, but I actually *hope* that he will forget again some year, handing me even more justification for my annual public chastening. I guess this fantasy and my teasing is what C. G. Jung meant when he referred to the "integration of the shadow." Or perhaps that is just a flimsy rationalization. But that's not the point.

Getting back to the point, today is the fourth Sunday in Lent and the fifth in our series on levels of moral development from a Christian perspective. In this series we are trying to examine how people in general make decisions that fall into the category of moral decisions, how we make these decisions. Most of us make moral decisions or decisions concerning ethical matters naturally or as a matter of course. There is a process underlying these decisions, however, whether that process is conscious or unconscious. If we can make that process conscious, we have a better chance of making an enlightened choice when it comes to framing our response to some very complex moral issues.

The stages of moral development, as articulated by Lawrence Kohlberg, are not only helpful in elucidating the process by which we make moral decisions; they also present us with a template by which we can view our society and other societies. How would a Christian come to a decision concerning a matter of ethical import? How would a Muslim do this? What would frame the decision for an atheist? If we can come to some clarity on these issues, we may be in a better place to address the lawlessness, the ethical vacuum, the moral depravity that poisons not only our society but many societies.

The first two weeks we examined the punishment-avoidant and the reward-obtaining stages of moral development. In these stages the child acts in a responsible manner to avoid a punishment or to obtain a reward. The Christian expression of these two levels is apparent when the Christian's commitment to living a moral or Christian life is grounded in the desire to escape the fires of hell (eternal punishment-avoidant) or go to heaven (eternal reward-obtaining) after he/she dies.

The problem with these first two stages is that they exemplify a primitive, childish, and self-serving approach to morality. Actions are judged on the basis of how they affect *me*, whether they will prove to be to *my benefit* or not. In addition, when a person in the course of his/her spiritual journey begins to doubt the existence of a literal heaven and a literal hell, which many/most people do at some time in their life, the promise of heaven and the threat of hell lose their sting. As Ivan remarks in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, "If God is dead, anything goes!" If there is no God to either reward or punish us either in this life or the next, why should we live a moral life?

Secular humanists maintain that even without a God (whose existence or reality they either doubt or deny), it would still be a good idea to live a moral life. They maintain that a moral code makes sense on a rational level as a necessary precondition to living together in a society. Sigmund Freud, who described himself as a Jewish atheist, made this case in *The Future of an Illusion*. In this book, he stated his belief that we would be better off if we were to discard the childish illusion that there is a God who will not only protect us from the dangers of this life, but who will also administer justice in the afterlife, in order that we might be able to approach the issue of morality from a rational, scientific viewpoint.

Although I am in favor of approaching the issue of morality from a rational, scientific viewpoint (hence this reflection series), our approach as Christians is a little different. I doubt very seriously if we (both us as individuals and a country) would be better off without our belief in God. This is because God, to me, is not an illusion, as Freud believed, but a reality. I fail to see how the denial of a psychic and perhaps even an ontological reality would be of benefit to me or anyone else.

Although I am not a student of history, I am also unable to come up with any great examples of atheistic governments and countries that surpass us on a moral level. Joseph Stalin in Russia, Pol Pot in Cambodia, and Mao Zedong in China caused the death of tens of millions of their own citizens. It is estimated that Chairman Mao may have killed over thirty million of his own people. I am also not impressed with the quality of life and the protection of minorities in present-day Russia or China. When I mentioned this to someone several years ago, he replied that Adolf Hitler regarded himself as a Christian.

Individuals who declare themselves Christian, and perhaps even believe themselves to be Christian, but who live lives that, in my opinion, fall far short of the life that Jesus lived and the life that Jesus called us to live, haven't evolved spiritually in the way that Jesus would have us evolve. They have not gone deeply enough into either Christianity or the teachings of Jesus. I remember my father saying, "How do we know that Jesus' way would not work either on a personal or an international level? No one, or at least very few people have ever tried it." I don't regard Adolf Hitler as a Christian, even if he attended church on occasion, and I doubt if Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed for a failed attempt on Hitler's life, would have, either.

As we examine each of these stages, the bottom line is that we are trying to compare them to what Jesus taught and to how he lived his life. For example, it does not seem to me that Jesus lived his life to avoid the fires of hell or in hope of an eternal reward. Jesus also did not define himself in terms of family or social relationships, which

is characteristic of stage #3. He had a deeper grounding than this for his identity. He did not feel the need to abide by all the religious laws of his society, or his culture, which is dictated in stage #4. He violated the purity laws and he intentionally broke the laws of the Sabbath to make a point. His point was that the Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath. The point is that Christian morality is about more than obeying laws and fulfilling one's social duty. It is an expression of our relationship with God. Before I go on to the 5th level, the level that Kohlberg calls "Social Contract," I would like to return to an example of stage #3 (Good Boy--Good Girl) and stage #4 (System Maintenance). This example jumped out at me this past week as I read a recent newsletter from Straight Ahead Ministries, our annual mission recipient every October. Straight Ahead Ministries works to rehabilitate young men who have been caught up in gang life, gang membership, gang warfare, gang mentality. When David Crane, Beth Hook, Cricket Port, and I visited their residential program several years ago, we were taken on a tour of the facility by one of the young men, who hailed from Fall River. Through the guided tour, I became aware of what a sheltered life I have lived and what a sheltered and privileged life my children have led!

Our sixteen-year-old guide told us that he did not know either of his parents, and that he had been stabbed twice and shot twice in the course of inter-gang conflict. He also told us that, at that time, there were six prominent gangs in Fall River in addition to a number of smaller Vietnamese and Cambodian gangs. This really surprised me. Two of these gangs, the Bloods and the Crypts, are international. I had thought that their presence was limited to big cities like Los Angeles, but our guide informed us that they have branches in practically every big city in Massachusetts. I thought I knew a lot about gangs from the *West Side Story* depiction of the Sharks and the Jets, but I apparently have a lot more to learn!

It is commonly assumed that gang members do not live by a moral code. I believe this is incorrect. They actually live by a very strict moral code! The problem is that this code is characteristic of stage #3. It needs to evolve to stage #4 and perhaps even further. If it stays on stage #3, we can expect a continuation of the wanton murders, drive-by shootings, rapes, and drug dealing that poison the soul of a community and makes life a living hell for its law-abiding citizens. It also shortens the life expectancy of gang members, which I believe now hovers in the late 20's.

In stage #3, as you recall, we define ourselves in the context of a relationship. We want to be seen and we want to see ourselves as a good son or daughter, a good mother or father, a good sixth-grade student, a good soldier or citizen. We may also wish to see ourselves and be seen by God as a good person, as a good Christian. This, not the promise of heaven or the threat of hell, becomes the grounding for our morality.

The gang member's morality is actually characteristic of this level. The problem is that it finds expression *only* in relation to the person's gang. The gang is the person's *only* referent group. Everyone else: mother and father, teacher or coach, minister or priest, fades into the background. There is also no sense of the connection with a larger society that characterizes stage #4.

If you are a member of a gang, whether an organized gang or a small group of cohorts, you pledge your loyalty to that gang. When I was young, I had a group of very close friends. We were probably more of a club than a gang, since we did not do anything wrong, but we did pledge our loyalty to each other. We also slashed our wrists and mingled our blood as a symbol of this pledge. For various reasons, I don't advise young people to do that nowadays.

Let's use an example. Imagine that you and your three friends steal a car that was left running outside a Cumberland Farms by someone who was in a hurry and who obviously did not care about controlling unnecessary exhaust emissions. (I'm not saying

I ever did this; I'm just saying *imagine* that *you* did. Admittedly, this may be a little bit of a stretch for some of you.) Anyway, you are driving, riding around having a good time, when you see a blue light in the rearview mirror. The gendarmes are on your tail! As you pull over to the side of the road, your three friends jump out of the car and head off into the woods, leaving you to face the police alone.

The police take you down to the station. (Mind you, I'm not saying this ever really happened; just *imagine* that it did.) There is no doubt that you are guilty since you were caught behind the wheel of the stolen car. The police want to know the names of your companions. Do you give them the names of your friends? The answer to this is No! Even when they tell you that it will go harder on you if you do not tell them who was with you in the car, you refuse. Why? You refuse, despite the pressure and threat of punishment not only by the judicial system but also by your parents, who are going to beat the living crap out of you, because you live by a very clear and very strong moral code: *You never rat on your friends.*

You may not think this is much of a moral code, but it is. People have spent years in prison, taking the fall for something they actually didn't do, rather than rat on their friends, rather than betray the code of silence that is an integral part of membership in the gang. As we know, there is also a code of silence among police officers. Police officers are reluctant to turn in a fellow officer who has engaged in or is engaging in illegal activities. It is unfortunate when their commitment to their fellow officers is greater than their commitment to society, to the laws, the social structure that they are sworn to uphold and defend.

Stage #1 and stage #2 hold little weight for gang members. There are scant rewards for living a moral life, especially when you can make serious money dealing drugs, and there is practically no fear of punishment. This is partially because of what the psychologist David Elkind called the "personal fable." Elkind says that adolescents are indeed special, but they think they are more special than they really are. Since they think they are smarter than the police, and believe they will never be caught, the fear of prison does not serve as a deterrent. In addition, many of them don't mind going to prison; they actually regard it as a rite of passage into adult life. Since their life is nothing special on the outside, they really don't mind "doing time."

These young people *do* have a moral code. The problem is that it is a very *limited* moral code. This code finds expression only in relation to a very small and specific referent group. These young people have no sense that morality might extend to their victims or to society as a whole. *This is because they don't feel like a part of society.* They see no future ahead of them that includes them as responsible members of society. When your moral code is on this stage #3 level, you are a very dangerous person!

So, what do we do? Do we build more and more prisons to incarcerate these young people? How will this solve the problem? In prison, it is even more important to be part of a gang, to be imprinted with the gang tattoo, than it is on the outside. When these young people are released from prison, as they inevitably are since we cannot lock all of them away for the rest of their life for breaking and entering, dealing drugs, or even engaging in gang warfare, will they have any sense of a larger connection? Will they feel more a part of society or will they feel less a part of society than they did when they entered? From a Christian perspective, will they have a sense of connection to something that is even bigger than society?

If I were in charge of the prison system in this country which, unfortunately, I am not, I would want to focus my rehabilitative efforts to this end. I would want all prisoners to be able to read and write, since they will have difficulty functioning as a responsible member of society without these basic skills. I would want them to receive job training

because, without a job, what would keep them from drifting back into a life of crime when they are released?

I would want them to receive counseling for their emotional and psychological problems, for the trauma that so many of them have experienced within their families of origin and from their neighborhoods. I would want them to know how to balance a checkbook and pay taxes, since the inability to do this can get them in a mess of trouble very quickly. I would want them to learn how to resolve interpersonal difficulties and conflicts without resorting to violence. I would want to teach them how to become better husbands and fathers.

I would want them to finish high school and, if at all possible, graduate from a two-year community college, which would be a lot easier now that they can utilize online learning. To be sure, all of these programs would cost money. There are those who resent using our hard-earned tax dollars to provide these juvenile delinquents or adult offenders with a high school or college education for free when we have to pay for our own children's education. I would remind these people that there is a price for everything. I support the offering of educational services to juveniles and adults because I want them to connect with society in a much more responsible way than they did when their only loyalty was to a gang. I want their level of moral development to move from stage #3 to stage #4, stage #5, and possibly even stage #6.

This is why I support allowing prisoners, even felons, to vote in state or national elections. First, their vote is unlikely to make a big difference. It is not as if they could band together and vote in a president who would be soft on crime. I would like them to think of themselves as a part of society and care about who is elected to government positions. I would like them to think about social issues, environmental issues. The more connections there are, the more of a sense of connectedness they feel to the society in which we live, the less we will have to fear them when they are released.

Stage #5 is just an extension of stage #4. In stage #5, the individual realizes that there is a system of principles that serve as the foundation for both our society and the laws that govern our society. In our country, the United States of America, that set of principles is enshrined in our Constitution. State and federal legislatures can pass any number of laws as our society evolves, but none of these laws should violate the basic principles of life in our society that are articulated in our Constitution.

This stage presupposes an even bigger vision than the one expressed in the lower stages. Over the course of our nation's history, in order to be true to the principles articulated in our Constitution, we have amended the Constitution. We have changed our laws to allow black people access to schools, to allow them to vote and hold office. We have recognized, first in Massachusetts and then on a federal level, that homosexuals have a constitutional right to marry and raise children, that they cannot be denied constitutional rights because of their sexual orientation. We changed our laws to allow women the right to vote because we realized that women and members of other minority groups have rights and privileges that are protected by our Constitution. The system of laws in our country is not static but dynamic. Our laws evolve in the light of the principles articulated by our founders and our own evolving vision of the kind of society we are trying to build, the kind of society within which we want to live.

In order to make these changes, we had to upset the existing social structure, at least temporarily. Some people were annoyed or more than annoyed at each of these changes. Some people even fought against them. But it was more important to grant to all people the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" unfettered by prejudice and discrimination than to maintain the status quo.

Let me give you just two examples of how the dialectical tension between two points of view can be resolved on the level of stage #5. Let's say that the police catch me, not in

the stolen car, but standing next to it. (Remember, I am asking you to use your imagination here!). When they grab me and ask me what the hell I am doing here, when they ask me whether I stole this car or not, trembling in fear, I confess that I did. Case solved.

Not so quickly! The police, in their haste to wrap things up, neglected to read me my Miranda rights! They never told me that I had the right to remain silent, that anything I said could and would be used against me, and that I had the right to an attorney. Since I am a minor, I should also have not been interrogated without having at least one of my parents present at the interrogation. Since the police failed to inform me of my Constitutional rights, my confession is invalid; it cannot be used against me. Reluctantly, they have to let me go. The benefit to society by locking me up is mitigated by my rights to a fair interrogation. Like it or not, even though I am obviously guilty, they have to let me go.

This is why we have a Supreme Court. One of the tasks of the Supreme Court is to decide between conflicting rights, a task that they attempt to resolve through discerning the expressed or unexpressed intent of the framers of the Constitution. For example, I have certain property rights. I have a right to keep my house or sell it. You, who are Black, have a right not to experience discrimination. When I decide that I would rather not sell my house to you because you are Black, I am creating a conflict between your personal rights and my property rights. The Supreme Court has decided that, in these cases, personal rights are more important than property rights, and that I have no right to refuse to sell you my house.

This adjudication, by the way, is presently under attack by the religious right, who maintain that their religious beliefs entitle them to discriminate against people of a certain color, religion, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity. I find their argument repulsive. We do not have a God-given right to discriminate against LGBTQ people, not to allow them to marry, raise children, serve in the armed forces, or purchase a wedding cake. When the Supreme Court carves out exceptions, enabling religious groups or religious individuals to deny others their Constitutional rights based on their religious "beliefs," they are treading on dangerous ground. And religions should be ashamed of using their special status to justify prejudice and discrimination against anyone. I don't think Jesus would be proud of such an abuse of Christian belief, faith, or membership.

As I mentioned last week, despite the claims of certain Christian activists, Jesus was not an anarchist. He was not a revolutionary. He did not want to lead a revolt against Rome, even though such a revolt was warranted. He was not an opponent of the social structure, the laws and customs of his culture. At the same time, he was not bound by these laws, by these customs. He did not define himself in relation to them. He simply wanted to help them evolve. He wanted to help them evolve in the light of an even greater allegiance, an even greater loyalty, a deeper and far more important relationship. He wanted us as individuals and as a society to ground our identity and our lives in our relationship with God.

Jesus articulated a deeper principle for his society and ours--the law of love. He told us that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind. He told us we should love our neighbor as ourselves. The apostle Paul, as evidenced in his letter to the church at Rome, supported the existing social structure, though I suspect he was not thrilled by it. He then called Christians to a deeper spiritual vision, the one articulated by Jesus, the kind of vision that will hopefully inform the legal system of our country and every country. He said that underneath every law, even those laws that are articulated in the Torah, lies *the law of love*.

Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law. I have come not to abolish it but fulfill it."

As we continue our journey through Lent, and especially as we enter into Holy Week, we will hopefully glimpse that larger vision that guided Jesus' life, that led him to lay down his life for us.

As we enter into the celebration and the experience of Easter, we will hopefully glimpse how this leads us as individuals and as a society to resurrection, to new life in relation to God.

Then we will truly discover the heaven that we were seeking all the way back in the second of Kohlberg's stages.

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.