

**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

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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: Luke 22:14-23

Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”
(Luke 22:19)

I am really looking forward to resuming worship in our sanctuary on Sunday, June 27—just two weeks from now! I know it has been a different experience for you to either read my reflection through the Keeping in (Virtual) Touch emailed missives or to listen to it as recorded in the abbreviated devotional service that is sent to you or posted on our website every week. It is not the same as meeting as the gathered church in our beautiful sanctuary every Sunday morning for a full worship service. The experience has been different for you; it also been different for me.

The difference for me lies not in the construction of my weekly reflections, though during this pandemic I have claimed the latitude of making my reflections a little longer and often more in the tradition of the prophets--more responsive to social and political issues than I have traditionally done on Sunday mornings. I guess I have thought of these reflections as sort of a personal blog or podcast and, accordingly, have taken certain liberties. What has been missing *for me* is the set of feelings with which I approach Sunday morning worship.

Every Sunday morning, my task is to lead you in worship. I take this task, this charge seriously. I try to structure every part of the service in such a way that it might

help you to come closer to God through Jesus, that it might help you come to know both God and yourself more fully, that it might help you to deepen your relationship with God and with the true Center of your being. Then, together, we explore the outward expression of this religious awareness as individuals and as a community of faith in our response to the needs of the world. Together we explore what it means to be not only disciples, followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, but also apostles, bearers of the Good News of the gospel to a world that desperately needs it.

I don't know how to break this to you, but it's actually not all about you! I have exactly the same religious or spiritual needs that you do! I long for what the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow called a "peak experience," what the theologian Rudolf Otto called "an experience of the numinous." It is not always easy to do, but I try to come to worship every Sunday with an attitude of openness and expectancy. I especially seek to manifest an attitude of emptiness because I never know what part of the service will touch me. It may be a passage of scripture. It may come while listening to an introit or anthem sung by our choir. It often occurs through the words of a hymn. But practically every Sunday the transcendent briefly, momentarily breaks through into my world of space and time; I encounter it, or it encounters me, or both.

This encounter with the divine, with the sacred, may be experienced as a feeling, as a point in the worship service when, in the words of the great reformer John Wesley, "I find my heart strangely warmed." I might be reading a passage of scripture or singing the third verse of a hymn that I hardly know, and suddenly I get choked up. I may even be moved to tears. This is always the tipoff to me that something powerful is happening--I get choked up or teary. I consider those moments to be little epiphanies, little religious experiences. As such, they are precious to me.

Not surprisingly, since I am basically a "thinking" type rather than a "feeling" type, I sometimes experience this moment during worship as a cognition. I read something, perhaps something in the Bible, perhaps even something I have read a hundred times before, and I suddenly see it in a new way, I see it in a new light. I also consider this "aha!" moment of insight to be an epiphany, a religious experience. I consider any experience, whether it is cognitive or affective, that helps me to deepen my relationship with God to be or function as a religious experience.

During the last communion service that we had together, before we basically closed down because of the pandemic, I had this kind of experience while I was saying the Words of Consecration during our observance of the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

I was saying the Words of Consecration, as I always do, by memory. As I said them, I pictured Jesus sitting at table with his disciples at their Passover observance. Jesus knew that this was not an ordinary Passover meal. It was a Passover meal, to be sure, but it was also more than that. It was his Last Supper with his disciples.

As he sat at table with them, Jesus knew what was going to happen. He knew that he needed to go into the Garden of Gethsemane to be with God in prayer. He knew that his closest friends, the ones who vowed to be with him in his moments of need, would fall asleep. He knew that when he was arrested, his disciples would desert him. He knew that Peter would deny him, and that Judas would betray him. He knew that if God did not remove this cup from him, he would be flogged, that he would have a crown of thorns smashed down on his head, and that he would die a painful death on the cross. And he knew he would have to go through this alone.

I was picturing all this as I stood behind the communion table holding up the piece of bread that I was going to bless and that the Diaconate servers were going to distribute. As I said the Words of Consecration, which I have said hundreds of times, one word in particular jumped out at me. That was the word “thanks.” Suddenly, I got a little choked up.

There are three descriptions of the Last Supper in the gospels. When we compare them, it is apparent that Matthew copied Mark, the first gospel to be written, practically word for word, while Luke’s version is only slightly different. For some reason, there is no account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John. In its place we have the account of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet and giving them the new commandment: that they love one another as he has loved them.

In Luke we read:

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Think about it. At that moment in his life Jesus not only remembered to give thanks; he actually *was* thankful. How could he possibly be thankful at a time like that? How could he possibly feel gratitude in his heart knowing full well what was to come? When someone can do something like that, I get very curious. I want to know how the person did it. I want to know how he/she can live a present or face a future that is much worse than anything I ever have or probably ever will experience, *and still be thankful.*

Of course, and this may come as no surprise to you, I suspect that it has something to do with the person's faith, with the quality of his/her relationship with God.

In the words that Jesus spoke that evening, the words that we use in the consecration of the elements in our communion service, Jesus is not only *telling* us how to die properly; he is also *showing* us how to die properly. In this simple act, he is also *teaching and showing us how to live*. If we know the right way to die, we will also know the right way to live. The reverse is also true: if we know the right way to live, we will also know the right way to die. I believe that this is the essential truth, the essential teaching that can prepare us for that existential moment that we commonly describe as our death.

From what I understand to be the central theme of both Christian and Buddhist spirituality, it seems to me that the secret of life, the secret of living a meaningful life involves living life fully in the present. Jesus did not allow his anticipation of tremendous physical and emotional pain in the immanent future to cloud his experience of simply being with his disciples around the table. He was present *to* them; he was present *with* them. He did not allow his awareness, his precognition of their inadequacies to prevent him from accepting them, from caring about them, and from loving them.

Several years ago, a packaged adult religious education program was making the rounds of churches across the nation. It was entitled "One Month to Live." The program basically challenged us to consider what we would do with our lives, specifically what we would do *differently* with our lives if we knew we had only one month to live.

I think this question is timely. Last week, during our worship service, we reflected on the staggering number of people in our state, in our country, and in the world that have died this past year as a direct result of COVID-19. This global pandemic, like the Black Death and other plagues, has aroused fears in some people, in some religious traditions, that the end of time, the so-called "last days" are at hand. As you know, I am skeptical that the human race is facing the end of the world in some cosmic, apocalyptic sense, but I do know that for several of the people on our prayer list, they may be facing the end of the world as they know it much sooner than they anticipated. For at least one of them, death is immanent. Of course, this may also be true of all of us.

I remember as a young boy talking about the so-called "end times" with my father following a sermon on this theme that we heard in church. My dad told me that he heard a story about Francis of Assisi, whom you know is my patron saint. My dad said that Francis was out plowing a field one day when someone asked him what he would do if he

knew that the world was going to come to an end tomorrow. Francis said that he would go on plowing the field.

I would like to have the attitude, the faith stance of St. Francis. I would like to live like St. Francis and die like St. Francis. After all, if you are doing what you should be doing with your life, why would you do something different because you are running out of time? I think a quick trip to church to repent would be a waste of time. As they say in the theatre, a good exit can't cancel out a bad performance.

I think the secret of experiencing a good death is the same as experiencing a good life: to live in the present--with gratitude, with a spirit of thanksgiving for the gift that God has given us. There is a Zen story that illustrates this point. My son, Jay, reminded me of this story not long ago.

A man was being chased by a hungry tiger. To escape he grabbed ahold of a vine and lowered himself over the edge of a ledge. However, when he looked down, he saw another tiger waiting for him on the ground. He couldn't go up and he couldn't go down. At that point he realized that two little mice, one white and one black, were beginning to gnaw through the vine.

As the man hung there, with no way to escape his immanent death, he noticed a beautiful wild strawberry that was growing out of the rocks just within his reach. He reached out, plucked the strawberry, and placed it in his mouth. It was unbelievably delicious!

Jesus knew at the time of the Last Supper that there was no way that he could escape death. But this did not prevent him from enjoying a last meal with his friends. It also did not prevent him from affirming his relationship with God. When he took the bread, he gave thanks for the joy of this last meal, for the joy of this little piece of bread. Then he blessed it, he broke it, and he shared it with his friends.

I would like to share a fantasy with you, but it can't go any further than here. It's just between you and me. I wouldn't want anyone outside this church to get the impression that I am not playing with a full deck!

For many years now, I have thought about what I would do if I were in prison about to be executed for some crime. I haven't quite figured out why I would be there, because I don't really commit a lot of serious crimes. I know that I annoy some people by being a New York Yankees fan in Red Sox Nation, for my liberal theology, or my more than marginal propensity to find parallels between Christian and Buddhist spirituality, but I don't think this should justify my execution. Anyway, on my eve of my execution the warden asks me what I would like for my last meal.

For a long time, when I entertained this fantasy I thought, “Who cares?” Why would it make any difference what I ate or drank that evening since I was going to be executed the following morning? If, however, my “last meal” was breakfast on the day of my execution, I decided I would choose something that would take a long time to eat. I would tell the guards that I have to chew each mouthful forty times for, as we all know, this is good for our digestion. However, they would probably see through this clever ruse before too long and interrupt my leisurely breakfast when it was time for me to face the firing squad.

Basically, when ruminating on this scenario, I would think, “How could I possibly enjoy a meal at a time like that?” What I ate or drank would probably be the last thing on my mind. Then I remembered the Zen story of the man fleeing the tiger. When there is no way out, *and trust me, there is no way out for any of us*, the secret of both living and dying with gratitude and peace in our hearts is to *enjoy the strawberry!*

My favorite meal is meat loaf, baked potato, and my wife’s green bean casserole. Since I wouldn’t have to worry about my cholesterol numbers at a time like that, I want bacon strips on the top of the meat loaf, onion rings on top of the green bean casserole, and a lot of thick creamery butter for the baked potato. I’ve made up my mind. If I ever find myself on death row the evening before my execution, this is what I will order. When it comes, I would like to give thanks. Then I hope I will truly and fully enjoy it.

As much as I like the Zen story about the man, the tigers, and the strawberry, it does not exactly capture what I feel about the moments immediately preceding my death. As much as I feel this story conveys a profound lesson about the importance of seizing the moment, it also strikes me as somewhat superficial. This is because (1) it has to do with me; and (2) it has to do with something that gives me sensual pleasure.

I prefer the Buddhist teaching about what it means to be a bodhisattva, simply because this is more in keeping with Jesus’ teachings about living and dying, his teachings about the way to approach our death. As you may know, the goal of Buddhist spirituality is to experience nirvana during this life and then to enter into nirvana after we die. If we are truly enlightened, if we enter into nirvana after we die, which is the equivalent of the Christian heaven, we escape from the cycles of rebirth; we no longer have to be reborn into the realm of samsara, the realm of suffering.

According to Buddhist legend and teaching, many ages ago a man, through his devout spiritual practices, attained Buddhahood in his lifetime. This meant that, when he died, he would be granted entrance into nirvana. However, just as the man reached the gate of heaven and was about to enter, he heard the sound of a little animal in pain. Some

accounts say the animal was a little rabbit. Because he had truly experienced his own Buddhature, because he was enlightened, and because his heart was filled with compassion, the man immediately knew that he could not enter into nirvana until every single sentient being had been released from suffering. So, he asked to go back into this world of space and time, this realm of suffering, and to be reborn as many times as it would take to liberate all sentient beings in the universe from unnecessary suffering.

In Mahayana Buddhism, which is the tradition within which Tibetan Buddhism and also Zen stand, a bodhisattva refers to anyone who has generated bodhicitta, a spontaneous wish and a compassionate mind to attain Buddhahood *for the benefit of all sentient beings*. Every morning, every bodhisattva (and all of us who aspire to be bodhisattvas) renew the following vows:

*However innumerable sentient beings, I vow to save them all.
However inexhaustible the passions, I vow to extinguish them all.
However immeasurable the dharmas, I vow to master them all.
However incomparable the Buddha's truth, I vow to attain it.*

I guess I am saying that I would like my last thought, my last act before my death to be not about me and my own pleasure, but about others. I would rather think about a wounded little rabbit than a delicious strawberry. I believe that this is the way that Jesus approached his death.

The basic truth behind my little execution fantasy, the Zen story about the man, the tigers, and the strawberry, and the path of the bodhisattva is that the best preparation for a good death, a meaningful death, a peaceful death, a beautiful death is to live our life fully in the present. If we are doing what God calls us to do with our life, why would we feel the need to make some dramatic change in the last month of our life? We, like St. Francis, could just go on plowing the field.

Others have said this much better than I. One such person is my very best buddy Lao Tzu. In poem #50 in the Tao te Ching, the version that is translated by Stephen Mitchell, Lao Tzu, in describing the Master, the truly enlightened man or woman, says,

*The Master gives himself up
to whatever the moment brings.
He knows that he is going to die,
and he has nothing left to hold on to:
no illusions in his mind,
no resistances in his body.
He doesn't think about his actions;
they flow from the core of his being.*

*He holds nothing back from life;
therefore, he is ready for death,
as a man is ready for sleep
after a good day's work.*

This is the way I would like to live, and this is the way I would like to die. If I can truly “give myself up to whatever the moment brings,” if I “hold nothing back from life,” I will be ready for death. I will be able to just let go, to trust, to put my hand in Jesus’ hand, and to cross over into the great Mystery, the great Unity, with the same sense of gentle peace that I feel when I drift off to sleep, tired after a good day’s work.

As we heard in our scripture lesson, Jesus shows us the right way to die, which, coincidentally, is the right way to live. If we are totally present to the wonder, to the gifts that are ours right here in the present, no matter what lies before us, our hearts, like Jesus’ heart, will be truly thankful.

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