

## TO STEAL SECOND BASE . . .

(09/08/2024)

Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 29:18  
Matthew 4:17-22, 8:18-22

*Without a vision, the people perish.* (Proverbs 29:18)

*A scribe then approached and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Mt. 8:19-20)*

Here we are at the beginning of another church year! In past years, in past decades, we would have designated today as Rally Day. It was the day when church school resumed for our children. We always had a Service of Dedication of our Church School Superintendent, the members of the Board of Christian Education, and our church-school teachers. This special service was also, not surprisingly for this church, followed by food—often a cookout.

Last month, at our Diaconate meeting, when we discussed whether we should observe Rally Day this year, we realized that times have changed. We no longer have children in our Sunday school. Our “regulars” are not all “coming back” from their summer home or traveling. The term “rally” no longer applies. It is simply the beginning of another church year, but that is special in itself! In a nod to a meaningful tradition, we will be joining in the Litany for the Beginning of a Church Year following my sermon. And yes, we will be having a special display of culinary delights at the coffee hour following this morning’s service!

Speaking of food, I don’t know if you enjoy Chinese food. I do! I don’t care if it is *real* Chinese food, the kind they serve in China. Whether it is or it isn’t, I enjoy it.

Whether Darlene and I are eating out at a Chinese restaurant or enjoying take-out at home, I look forward to opening the Chinese fortune cookie at the end of the meal. It’s not that the cookie is tasty. It really isn’t. It is all about the little rectangular piece of paper tucked inside the cookie. On one side of this paper is a number that I can use to play the lottery. The problem is that I don’t play the lottery—it strikes me as a game for the mathematically challenged.

My interest in the fortune cookie has to do with the other side of that piece of paper, the side that tells my fortune. I always get a little excited when I begin breaking the cookie apart, anticipating what I am about to learn about myself, about life, and about the future of my life. Opening a Chinese fortune cookie is a lot like the feeling I get when I open my presents on Christmas morning! (I don’t know why I just said that. It

really isn't. It isn't even close!) But I do look forward to breaking open the cookie and learning what words of wisdom the gods want to share with me for the living of my life.

I have been studying Chinese philosophy and religion for many years. I confess I feel a greater kinship with Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, his disciple Chuang Tzu, and the other Taoist masters than I do for Confucius. So, when I open my cookie, I imagine that Lao Tzu, the ancient Chinese mystic and author of the *Tao te Ching* is actually speaking to me, imparting his wisdom across the millennia to help me with the creative unfolding of my life. (I have a hunch that this is how my colleagues and clients who are into astrology feel when they read their charts, the horoscope that is published in the daily newspaper.)

Earlier this summer, I had an unsettling experience in relation to my Chinese fortune cookie fortune. It's not that the little piece of paper predicted some misfortune that lurked just around the corner. It also wasn't the least bit critical of me, which some of them are. I hate the ones that I feel are critical of me. As you know, because I suffer from low self-esteem, I am especially sensitive to the slightest hint, even from a fortune cookie, that I need to change or amend my ways. But that's not the point.

What was unsettling about this particular fortune cookie was that the fortune cast a shadow of doubt over my belief that these words of wisdom are really direct quotes from my good buddy and spiritual guide Lao Tzu. When I tell you what the fortune was, I'm sure you will see what I mean. It said, "You can't steal second base while you are keeping one foot on first."

It's not that the saying is not true. I think it's very true! I am just not sure that this saying is attributable to an ancient Chinese mystic. I'm not a scholar of ancient Chinese mysticism, but I don't think Lao Tzu or Chuang Tzu or even Confucius would have used a baseball analogy to make their point.

At first, I felt cheated. Then I began to think about it.

We have a special little church, a church that has served its members, this community, and the larger community, the world, for the past 159 years. Over the past 159 years, we have touched a lot of people's lives—for good. We have tried to the best of our ability, despite our failings, to not only preach and teach the message of Jesus, who he was and what he taught; we have tried to live it.

We are an open and affirming and church, a place where LGBTQ individuals and couples feel welcome and know they belong. We support twelve missions, one each

month, in our special offerings. We actively support the Southborough Food Pantry and the other ecumenical efforts of the United Parishes of Southborough. To be sure, our church is presently going through a difficult period financially, but we have hope. We know that we have a place, a significant place in the whole scheme of things. We know that we deserve to live!

We have a rich history from which we draw as we step forward into a new church year. However, we must resist the urge to bask in the warm glow of reflection on our past. We need a vision if we are to move forward into the future as a Christian church. Proverbs 29:18 tells us “Without a vision the people perish.” Without a vision we have no way to determine what we should be doing in our life together: in our fellowship, our worship, and our mission. We need a light to illumine the path that lies before us in the coming year. Then we need the courage to step off first base, the courage to make this vision a reality.

BTW, the very fact that you are in church this morning, that you are listening to or reading this sermon online, is evidence that you have at least reached first base! I also happen to know that you in particular have moved quite a way further. Yes, I’m talking to you! But trust me--there’s more ground to cover before you find your way to “home.”

The importance of having a vision in determining our goals and objectives is illustrated in a little vignette from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice, in her journey, has come to a crossroads. There are several options, several paths she might take. The problem is that she does not know which path she should choose.

Alice looks up and sees the Cheshire cat sitting on the branch of a tree. Alice asks the cat which path she should choose. The cat asks her where she is going. Alice replies that she has no idea.

“Well,” replies the cat, “if you have no idea where you are going, I guess it doesn’t matter which path you choose.”

If we do not have a vision that informs our calling and shapes our identity as a church, how can we determine which path or paths we should walk in the year to come? We suspect that we may need to change in some ways, perhaps in many ways, but how? Do we need to change our worship service? Is it possible for us to make our worship more appealing to young people without losing the depth dimension that touches us old-timers so deeply? Do we need to offer something different in our study groups? If we are to be intentional about attracting new members, we may need to broaden our target

demographic, the kind of people who are likely to be drawn to this church. Can we keep the best of what we already have and still change and evolve?

We need to ask these questions. We need to struggle with these questions. As we do so, however, we need to remember the sage advice of that little fortune cookie: “You can’t steal second base while you are keeping one foot on first.” I have a feeling that these words of wisdom apply to us as individuals in our life journey, in our spiritual journey, just as they do to our church, our society, our nation, and the world.

BTW, for those of you who have internalized and who live out of a moral code that is grounded in the Ten Commandments, within the context of this baseball metaphor, it is ok to steal. Trust me!

Our gospel reading this morning illustrates two responses to the call for change. The first, the calling of the disciples, is an example of one kind of response: letting go and stepping forth into the journey. This is characteristic of disciples.

*As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him.*

The second is the description of what our Bible calls “followers.” The followers had more than a curiosity about Jesus, more than an interest in Jesus; they felt drawn to follow Jesus. However, when push came to shove, they were unwilling or unable to let go of first base to venture forth into the unknown. They were too attached to their need for security or the maintenance of their religious beliefs and traditions to enter into the spiritual death and resurrection to which Jesus called them.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, said that we cannot step twice into the same river. This is true! It is true because the river into which we step is constantly changing. Even though it is the same river with the same name in the same location, it is not the river into which we stepped last year, last month, or even five minutes ago.

In addition, we need to remember that we, like the river, are constantly changing. Even though we consider ourselves to be the same person with the same name and perhaps the same street address, we are not the person we were last year, last month, or even five minutes ago. Because of our life experiences, we, like the river, are constantly changing. In the lingo of quantum physics, we are a constantly changing energy field in the midst of larger constantly changing energy fields.

Because change is ubiquitous in our world, in our nation, in our families, in our lives, even in our bodies and minds as we age, we long for something we can grasp to slow things down. We long for a rock, an anchor that can keep us from being swept up and swept along in the fast-paced current of life.

The anchor that we need is not our time-honored traditions or even our religious beliefs, as meaningful as they may have been to us. The anchor we seek is a deep grounding in our relationship with the living God, the God revealed to us in Christ Jesus. This alone can serve as our rock, the firm ground beneath our feet. Our faith and trust in this God provide us with the resources we need to engage the life that has been given us in the present and the courage we need to step forward into an uncertain future.

This faith is not something fixed, codified, or set in stone. Our faith needs to grow and change. We may think we need a fixed point, a rock to which we can cling when we are buffeted by the storms of life, when the changes that swirl around us leave us dizzy and disoriented. However, it may just be that what we really need is to learn how to swim. Our faith can teach us how to swim!

This is why we cannot settle for what we learned about God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit, and about the meaning of life so many years ago in Sunday school. We need to deepen our understanding of God, and we need to deepen our relationship with God through our participation in the spiritual disciplines of our religious tradition: worship, study, prayer, mission, and sharing with other members of the community of faith--learning and growing together. We also need to be open, as we are in this church, to the insights, experiences, and revelations that we receive from other spiritual traditions. They can help us grow, help us deepen our own faith. Remember, there are several, perhaps even many paths up the same mountain.

As we meet here this morning at the beginning of a new church year, we do so with the realization that we are stepping forth into a stream. In some ways this church is the same church it has been for the last 159 years. We occupy the same little piece of land and the same building, though it has been beautifully updated through the years. We also share the spirit, the sense of community, the sense of fellowship that has marked our gathering throughout our history. And yet we are not the same; we are evolving. Every new person who becomes a member of our church, who becomes a part of our church family changes us.

As we meet here this morning on what we used to observe as Rally Sunday, we do so with the sense that we are new and constantly evolving people who are stepping into a new and constantly changing life-stream. This stream not only flows through our

world, our nation, and our church; it also flows through us. There is no way we can step apart from this stream. Our hope lies not in clinging desperately to the rock of our traditions, trying to turn the clock back to “better days.” We need to move forward, not backward. In order to survive, we need to learn how to swim. Then we will be able to save others who are drowning.

Lao Tzu or Confucius would tell us that it is great that we have made it to first base as a church. However, we can’t stay on first base forever. If we are to embark upon our journey to second base, third base, and ultimately to reach home, our true home, our spiritual home, we need to take a risk. We may need to let go of our tried-and-true traditions. Remember, we will never reach second if we keep one foot firmly implanted on first.

Let us now join together in a responsive reading of the “Litany for a New Church Year” that is printed in our bulletins. Then, with God’s help and guidance, let us step forward into the future that we are called to create as a church.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
September 8, 2024*