

COMMUNITY CHURCH OF THE MIDLANDS

Unapologetically Christian, Unapologetically Progressive

Pastor's Paragraphs

"WHEN THE NEW YEAR IS NOT NEW"

Now that our celebration of Christmas 2017 is over, I am reflecting on the many times I have been wished a happy new year. But the truth is that, in some ways, 2018 will not be new. We'll be facing numbers of concerns that are carried over from the previous year. In fact, I already have been asked by several people to share my thoughts on the so-called sexual misconduct issue which, according to an annual poll conducted by the National Associated Press, is the top news story of 2017.

But it's not just certain issues that are not new, it's also the continuing hunger of caring people to understand what a spiritual perspective is on matters that punctuate our daily lives. What is not new in 2018, then, is the recognition of our persistent need for a meaningful ethical perspective. Still, thank God, there are people-many of you who care about such principles and values and request information that might be of help in your own decision-making. So, I'll do something that definitely is not new: I'll do my best to respond to this most recent request.

I must admit, that I have spent only a very limited time thinking about what has been called the Weinstein effect'-the issue of sexual harassment. One reason is that, in my talking with a number of women, my hunch that the issue is more complicated than most people think has been confirmed. Actions that some women considered reprehensible, several others thought were not offensive, and still others told me they actually would be flattered to be the recipient of them! So what is considered sexual harassment or misconduct is not the same for different women and needs to be defined; but the complicating factor is that the women with whom I've talked could not agree on a definition that would be acceptable to all of them. (Later, I will suggest a general definition that might be appropriate for most men and women.)

There is a neglected reality that I have never heard discussed in any church: the fact that the whole matter of sexuality has been given a huge black eye by many churches and, especially, numbers of well-intended but, perhaps, not so well-informed pastors. Often, what passes for a "Christian" viewpoint on sexuality isn't Christian at all that is, if the word "Christian" refers to the teaching of Jesus. The truth is that in our biblical accounts, Jesus said nothing denunciatory about human sexuality or sexual expression, with only two exceptions, both of which I will mention later.

If that is true, why did Jesus' followers spend so much of their time acting as if bodily passions are evil or even sinful? Such an unfortunate understanding seems to have

resulted from the influence of Plato. Plato taught that one's spirit is "imprisoned" in the body, that sensual pleasure can keep one from finding true happiness, and that "animal" passions should be avoided; moreover, his views were well-known and widespread by the 1st century. Plato insisted that to focus on the sensual would divert attention from the highest reality, "the good." So, after the death of Jesus, it seems that his followers were influenced more by Plato than by the belief of Jesus that, as is reflected in the Genesis creation account, the body was created by God, followed by God's assessment that what had been created, including human_ physicality, was "very good." So, because of Plato's influence, many well-meaning Christians, unfortunately, have drawn a sharp boundary between physicality and spirituality-one that Jesus and his own scriptures did not embrace.

Instead of denigrating God's creation of the human body and its sexuality, Jesus gave us guidelines from his own scriptures to enable us to live our lives, including our sexual relationships, more fully. We all know what that guidance was: He asked us to love God by relating lovingly to one another. But what does that involve?

The kind of love that Jesus emphasized, of course, is agape-a love that seeks the highest good of every other person; so, applying that principle to human sexuality, he taught that the highest good is to avoid two actions that are unloving: lust and adultery.

By lust, Jesus seems to have meant relating to someone as if he or she were an object instead of a person, in a way that simply uses him or her for our benefit only.

Adultery, as most people would agree, is the opposite of seeking the highest good of someone because it can seriously hurt lawful spouses and greatly damage any children that may be involved.

Obviously, relating lovingly to someone also involves respecting his or her feelings, as well as one's willingness or unwillingness to be approached in a sexually-oriented manner or to engage in sexually. oriented behavior. So here is my simple definition of sexual misconduct:

- It is relating to another person with sexual speech or action that may not be welcomed by that individual. When we realize that other's preferences can vary greatly, to avoid offending another person by a sexually-oriented statement or act requires the development of sensitivity-and that is an aspect of genuine agape love that sets the stage for our experiencing life in all its fullness.

I champion the "Me Too" women who have dared to speak publicly about their experiences of sexual harassment and hope that other individuals, both men and woman, will be empowered to do likewise when that is appropriate. However, it is important to realize that any person who is accused needs to have his or her "day in court."

In other words, while most accusations probably are true, some. inevitably will be spurious. I personally know of a situation in which a man in North Carolina was accused

of forcibly having sex with a co-worker. Both of them were being considered for a promotion; but because of the woman's excessive absences, the man received the promotion instead of her. As a result, her animosity toward him was brutal, and, hoping to get him fired so she could step into his position, she accused him of rape. What she didn't know that Human Resources and many individuals did know, is that the man she accused of raping her was gay and, according to his physician, was unable to function sexually in a male-female relationship. All accusations of impropriety need to be taken seriously, since, as stated earlier, most of them probably are true; but, given human nature, it is unrealistic to assume that is the case for all of them.

Also, to protect herself, every woman needs to exercise reasonable discretion. It is hardly the quintessence of wisdom to accept a man's invitation to his hotel room to discuss a business matter. Good judgment needs to be exercised here.

Again, because most accusations of sexual harassment probably are grounded in reality, and since many individuals have limited sensitivity to the feelings of others, what can be done to ameliorate the situation? I believe that women should occupy more positions in management than they now do. Also, I hope that women will claim their power to speak up immediately if a man-or another woman-acts in an unwanted manner.

That communication needs strongly to be delivered to the offender at the moment the offense occurs; and, if the offender ignores it and the perceived offense occurs a second time, the offended individual needs, without delay, to involve authorities to make sure the incident does not occur again. The so-called "Weinstein effect" has taught us that women do have a great deal of power, if they choose to exercise it.

But, finally, what specifically should happen to a person who continues to engage in inappropriate sexually-oriented behavior? Thus far, the response of most businesses, corporations, and other organizations has been to fire an individual. From Hollywood to Washington, D.C., we have seen numerous once-powerful, once prominent persons lose a job, family, career, and reputation in a matter of days. Some of them were brilliant. Some of them have made noteworthy contributions to our life together. Some of them, apart from a seeming inability to channel their sexual urges more appropriately, were good, talented, marvelously productive people who still had a great deal to contribute to our common good. Others seemed to be little more than serial predators. But nearly all of them received the same punishment-a response that almost totally destroyed their lives. Is that fair? I believe not.

I think that any response to an infraction needs to be responsibly measured rather than merely reactionary. We need to rediscover nuance, to make reality-based distinctions between infractions.

Obviously, not every sexual indiscretion is the same. A person who gives a "date rape drug" to another individual and then molests him or her sexually is hardly in the same

category with someone who tries to comfort another by placing his hand on her back, as Garrison Keillor of Prairie Home Companion fame claims that he did; yet both actions resulted in the "offender's" being sued, fired, or both. So I hope that organizations can rediscover the importance of nuance, of making appropriate distinctions between various levels of behavior.

Moreover, I believe a distinction should be made between someone who has been accused of a comparatively recent indiscretion and one who engaged in such actively 20 or 30 years ago but has had no similar experiences since that time. Thus far, that seems not to be the case.

My comments here are preliminary and may need to be revised after I have had an opportunity to think more deeply about a spiritually based response to our number one news story in 2017. But, I am happy to share with you my tentative reflections on the issue; and, always, I welcome your questions and your responses to issues that, directly or indirectly, concern us all. But more than anything else, I value the fact that, in a very significant way, our "new year" is not really new. Let me repeat: It isn't new because, in 2018, wonderful people such as yourselves continue, as you always have done, to want to apply vital spiritual principles to the issues of everyday life. I am deeply pleased that, for us at CCM, that is not new; we have done it since our inception!

So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for your meaningful engagement in such a significant process, and for including me in that indispensable endeavor.

Love, joy and peace to each of you.

Warmly, your pastor and friend,

John

IT'S HAPPENING AT CCM*January, 2018***PLEASE NOTE THE CHANGE!**

Unless otherwise indicated, our fellowship gathers on the *2nd* and 4th Sunday of each month

Sunday, January 14 (2nd Sunday of the Month)**10:00 a.m. NEW YEAR'S WORSHIP SERVICE**

It is not difficult to find a radio or TV station, newspaper, magazine, or virtually any source on social media that generates fear and anxiety about what *could* be in store for us during 2018--both nationally and personally. And, of course, many of the concerns that those sources mention are grounded in reality. So is there any basis to hope that things will get better, any potential for a vital and meaningful future? Our pastor thinks so, and, despite abundant signs to the contrary, today he will sound a note of realistically based optimism. His message is entitled, "EXPERIENCING THE NEW YEAR YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED."

Sunday, January 28 (4th Sunday of the Month)**10:00 a.m. ENLIGHTENMENT: A TIME TO GAIN INSIGHT WE CAN USE DURING THE NEW YEAR**

Late in 2017, we began an exciting new series in which we take an important topic that faces us all and try to look at it, not from some political or personal perspective, but from the standpoint of abiding spiritual values. Surveys indicate that people in most churches who would *like* to be able to do that don't know *how*; so CCM is coming to the rescue! Instead of our telling you *what* to do, we give you time-tested spiritual principles and leave you free to decide whether or how to use them to benefit yourself and the world of which we are a part.

Thus far, we have talked about money and wealth, health care, big or small government, gun control and self-defense. We present more than one side of every issue; and, in *our* fellowship, we nurture thoughtful diversity of opinion.

Today, we will begin a *two-part* presentation on the currently relevant issue of immigration: one session this month and another next month. Because, as someone famously said, "a picture is worth a thousand words," our session this morning will feature a breathtaking film entitled *Exodus*, which presents camera and smartphone footage in real time that was filmed by persons from Syria and other countries who are fleeing to save their lives. This expose will help us to understand a reality that we hope we will never have to face ourselves, but one which requires us to make important decisions—one way or the other.

Next month, in our *second* session on the subject (February 25th), our pastor will help us to look at a variety of relevant issues related to immigration on which

Americans understandably have different points of view and examine them in light of spiritual values that usually are never considered. As always, we anticipate a great deal of caring but lively discussion from the group, a delightful characteristic of most of our opportunities to experience enlightenment. (Out be about 12 noon)

ANNOUNCEMENTS
SOME 'THANK YOUS'
From Our Musicians

We have received lovely expressions of appreciation from Evelyn and Mary Ann Clary for the Christmas remembrances they received. There was also a heartfelt thank you for the wonderful support our musicians receive from us as well as the value we, as a community, place on their contribution.

From Dale and Norma:

We have received a beautiful card, a photograph, and a thoughtful note from Dale and Norma Sessions, thanking us for our group visit, poinsettia, and the special birthday cake we had made especially for Dale.

From Our Pastor:

Dear fellow CCMers, every Christmas I am overwhelmed by your friendship and generosity. Your cards, telephone calls, food, invitations to share Christmas day with you, and other thoughtful gifts-provided individually and collectively-catapult me into a state of constant gratitude. But, as always, more even than your gracious remembrances,

I bask in the continuing warmth and love we experience and the trust you place in me as we share life together. For all of that, and for each of you, I am deeply grateful. May God bless you richly.

Your pastor and friend,

John

VISIT UPDATE

As you may recall, the December newsletter announced our plans, as a community, to visit Dale and Norma Sessions to celebrate Dale's 781 birthday. We did so and, as always, Dale and Norma were gracious hosts. We took them a Christmas poinsettia and had a classic, European Chocolate ganache and whipped cream cake made especially for Dale by Columbia's most outstanding creator of superlative confections, Chocolate Nirvana.

Our former associate minister's Alzheimer's disease has progressed, and he has difficulty recalling words to express what he wants to say. But he seemed to understand the comments of others, reflected in his facial expressions, laughter, and occasional comments. Moreover, stimulated, no doubt, by the special celebration in his honor, Dale actually was able to carry on a meaningful conversation with a couple of us when we were away from the rest of the group.

Unfortunately, several of our folks who had looked forward to this occasion were sick on the Sunday of our visit, and *one* of our members fell, broke a leg that very morning, and ended up in an Emergency Room. (A few of those individuals hope to visit Dale and Norma later, on their own.) But illness and accidents didn't keep us from having a warm and fulfilling time together with two of our all-time favorite people. At CCM, Dale and Norma constantly are with us in mind, heart and prayers, even if, at the moment, they may not be *physically* present.

They will always be a vital part of our church family!

HONORING OUR ANIMAL COMPANIONS

We may be the only church anywhere that takes the loss of one of our animal companions seriously enough to give them attention in our newsletter, but we do so with a full heart and well-deserved intentionality. Many of our little companions become "family," and their loss affects us deeply. So we share in the loss over the Christmas holidays of Dale and Norma Sessions' beloved cat, Callie, and Betty Jo Sullivan's saying goodbye to a long-time faithful companion, her very special dog Lucy. Love is experienced on many levels, and, at CCM, we believe that the loss of a relationship of caring many of us have had with our pets is important enough to merit communicating to other members of our fellowship. So Dale, Norma, and Betty, our hearts are with you.

BIRTHDAY CONGRATULATIONS

We all join together to celebrate the natal day of several of our fellow CCMers:

- Gary Davis on January 1
- Bill Ingbretsen on January 5
- Marti Fritz on January 12
- Mary Ann Clary on January 28
- Gail McKittrick on January 29

Happy, happy birthday, dear ones!

CCM:

FOSTERING JESUS'S SIMPLE APPROACH
TO SPIRITUALITY:

- FREEDOM FROM DOGMAS AND CREEDS,
- MAKING THE KINGDOM OF GOD A PRIORITY,
- AND FOLLOWING THE PATHWAY OF JESUS.

*WHEREVER YOU ARE, THE DIFFERENCE
IS WORTH ANY DISTANCE!*

Our Telephone:

Senior Pastor: (803) 331-9999. Our mobile cell phone is more reliable than our landline phone, because it is on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If no one answers, it usually means that our pastor is in a meeting, in a counseling session, doing regular spiritual mentoring, or is involved in some other form of ministry; but he will return your call as soon as possible, so please be sure to leave a message.

Our Websites:

CommunityCburchMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)

or

CommunityChurchOITheMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)

Our Mailing Address:

P.O. Box 6946, Columbia, S.C. 29260-6946

Our Location:

CCM usually gathers on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month, and any changes will be noted in our monthly newsletter. Please join us at the gorgeous Seven Oaks Community Center in beautiful Seven Oaks Park, 200 Leisure Lane (between St. Andrews and Piney Grove roads, just off 1-26 West). When you enter the spacious parking lot, you'll see the main entrance to our newly renovated building on your right. Once you are inside the Reception Area, our meeting locality is on your left. For updates on our programming, to verify meeting times, to learn about changes in scheduling, or for any pastoral need, please feel free to call 331-9999, night or day.

ALWAYS, WE'RE HERE FOR YOU!