

COMMUNITY CHURCH OF THE MIDLANDS

Unapologetically Christian, Unapologetically Progressive

Pastor's Paragraphs

Keeping Open to the Holy

During the earlier part of my ministry, I rarely heard anyone question the value of regular involvement in a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, ashram, or any other spiritual community. For the most part, their value was assumed. But of course, today, the situation is quite different. Regularly, I hear people raising questions about the validity of any involvement at all! In fact, standing in line at the post office a few days ago, I heard two individuals talking about the issue of church attendance. One of them was praising her church and expressing appreciation for her experiences there, but the other person told her that he had no interest in *any* religious group, hadn't been a part of one in years, and had no interest in having such a connection in the future. "They are a waste of time," he added, "and they're full of imperfect people."

Many Christians probably would be irritated to hear someone make such a comment, but what if the man had a point? Despite his insensitivity to the woman's feelings and his lamentable lack of interest in exploring *why* the lady found her church of value, the man may have been sharing an accurate assessment of his *own* personal experience—one that the lady needed to hear and respect.

We often forget the less than felicitous experiences that Jesus himself had with spiritual communities. It might be helpful to remember that he had *two* spiritual communities: a *private* one made up of the disciples whom he called to be his closest associates and with whom he seems to have spent most of his time, and a *public* one, the synagogue which he faithfully attended. His relationships with those two groups certainly were not always positive. The Gospel of Mark reports that Jesus often was disappointed by

them. Indeed, we're told that on one occasion, Jesus looked around with anger at members of the spiritual community that he had formed, "grieved at their hardness of heart." As we know, he was betrayed by a member of his close inner circle, another of them denied under pressure that he never knew Jesus, and almost all of his disciples totally abandoned him just before his death. Moreover, the "spiritual" people in his own synagogue not only rejected his interpretation of scripture, they actually chased him out of their house of worship and attempted to harm him physically. *Both* of his spiritual communities were composed of imperfect people.

So, I wonder: What would *Jesus* have said to the woman and the man in the post office about *his* own experiences with a religious community? And how might he have responded to them? My guess is that he would have accepted the experiences of each one as valid for him or her, because the truth is that Jesus himself had experienced *both* realities—the seriously flawed, *negative* ones, to be sure, but equally valid *positive* ones as well; and neither should be ignored.

I already have alluded to Jesus's negative experiences with his two spiritual communities, but what might he consider to be *positive*? Jesus was a very highly evolved person spiritually, but that accomplishment didn't "just happen" without significant input and modeling from *some source*. Jesus no doubt was keenly aware of the impact his parents had on him, both of whom had been carefully nurtured in, yes, a flawed synagogue! And Jesus himself constantly would have been exposed to those same influences in his own equally flawed synagogue. The value imparted by those spiritual communities was undeniable in his own life, and its importance led him, while visiting in Jerusalem with his parents, to go to the Temple there to seek even *more* spiritual depth and understanding. So highly evolved was he, even then, at about age 12, that the high priests in the Temple were amazed at the profound growth he *already* had experienced—albeit from the influence of flawed human beings in a flawed spiritual community!

It is obvious that Jesus was aware of the duality of experiences one can have, both positive *and* negative, in *any* human institution. That is understandable. Since there are no perfect human beings, *every* human effort or group, no

matter how lofty its goals or how committed its people, will be affected by human fallibility. There are *no* institutions (including our families) that are not handicapped by *some* dysfunctionality.

So, the man in the post office was absolutely right when he said that spiritual communities are full of imperfect people. So where does that leave us? It is easy for us as individuals to take either a positive or a negative experience with a spiritual community and see that as representing the institution in its *totality*—and not just that *one* institution but *all* similar groups. Jesus obviously did not allow himself to become involved in the luxury of making such false generalizations. With awareness of the undeniable duality of both positive and negative aspects in all human beings and in all human institutions, Jesus chose, without *denying* the negative, to accentuate the *positive*. He did that with every person he encountered and with every spiritual community he experienced. He never gave up on people, and he never gave up on the importance of spiritual communities! Why would he take such a stance?

Jesus was faced with the same reality that psychiatry has discovered to be true. Over the entrance to the building of the National Institutes of Mental Health is engraved this memorable slogan: “By the community we are *made sick*, and by the community we are *healed*.” But how can an entity that makes us sick also heal us? Because of the deep spiritual wisdom Jesus had learned from his flawed synagogue, he believed that every one of us is made in the image of *God*, so at our *core*, there is the potential to give and receive deeply meaningful love, and all we have to do is to discover it and live *into* that reality as Jesus did in his own life. But this truth remains: It was through a *spiritual community* that he learned that wisdom and was able to implement it. By the *community*—we can be healed! The spiritual community, with all of its lacks, flaws, and shortcomings helped Jesus to *keep the door open to the Holy*. So, *despite* its negative propensities, it is by the *community* that we have the potential to be made *whole*. Jesus knew that human negativity does not and cannot nullify the presence of God to those who, by keeping *open* to the Holy, make it possible for themselves to *experience* that reality.

Therefore, we learn from the Gospels that it was Jesus' custom always to be faithful in attendance each week *with* his public spiritual community. He did not limit himself only to his own private group. He wanted to continue a lifelong process of keeping himself open to the Holy at *every* possible opportunity. Consequently, he was able to say that he received all his spiritual wisdom and guidance for personal becoming toward fullness of life from One who is the great Parent of us all. Moreover, his two spiritual communities, the one he created *and* the synagogue, were mediums through which he could *share* what he had received with others so that *they* could grow toward greater fullness of life, as well.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe that Jesus would have understood and accepted the positive assessment of church by the woman in the post office as well as the negative assessment of the man. But surely he would have cautioned them not to discount the reality of the *other* person's experience. Jesus emphasized the value of commitment to a spiritual community, committed himself to two of them, expected those who are *truly* followers of the pathway he taught to do likewise, and promised that where even two or three are gathered together in his name (that is, seeking to embody the qualities he taught and lived), his spirit would be there with them.

Of course, Jesus knew that there would be numerous groups that do *not* adequately embody the qualities he taught and lived. There are so-called spiritual communities in which even the most *regular* attendees do not grow or *expand* their spiritual vision or quality of life. And, let us admit it: There are communities that actually *inhibit* growth. Others may *not* inhibit growth, but neither do they nurture it. The purpose of a really *good* spiritual community is *transformation*. One needs always to ask: How is my behavior changing for the better? How are my relationships *improving*? Is my being in this or that community modifying my way of thinking? There are people who are extremely active in a church who still think and believe *exactly* the same as they did ten years earlier! And there are churches whose members tend often to represent the dysfunctional culture of which they are a part more than they do the spiritual qualities taught by Jesus. The biblical injunction to be transformed *instead* of conformed to the culture around us is not even on their radar screen! Such churches, as the man in the post office

insisted, *can* be “a waste of time.” But there always are other options if we *look* for them!

It may be because of that reality that Jesus told us we can choose to take one of two roadways on our spiritual journey. One option is what he called a wide road, unfortunately taken by the unthinking majority, a path that leads to spiritual destruction. The other is a more narrow path, taken by those who avoid the popular big-crowd options, whose goal is to remain open to the Holy, to make abundant *space* available for the sacred—a path that has potential to lead us to the greater fullness of life God intended for us. Jesus’s obvious point seems to be that the spiritual community we choose and the level of our faithfulness to it can make or break us. The man in the post office may, unwittingly, have chosen a wrong alternative; but instead of *keeping* the door open for the Holy by looking for a *better* alternative, he slammed the door shut to *any* spiritual community, thereby surrendering an opportunity for greater growth and deeper fulfillment.

In Psalm 27, the psalmist pleads to God, “Do not hide your face from me,” never realizing that it is *we* who do the “hiding”—usually unconsciously; and we do it by the choices we make—or refuse to make.

So, my advice to anyone who wants to be an *authentic* follower of Jesus and to choose wisely is never to assume that all spiritual communities are *equal*. Every group will have people who are highly evolved, some that are not, and many who are in between; but that is not the most important factor. My own choice of a church in the past always has been based upon the qualifications of the pastor and whether or not he or she has the knowledge and depth to help me *evolve* more fully. Do I hear only that which I already know, or am I challenged and uplifted by new insights that help me to *grow*. When I have made my choice based primarily on that one factor, it has helped me, in my own life, to remain more fully open to the Holy.

It is my prayer that all of us, as was the case with one scriptural writer, will be able in some spiritual venue to discover with great joy, that “Surely the *Lord* is in this place, and I did not realize it.”

May you experience grace, love, and peace on your journey. As you go your way, know that I believe in you, your potential, your promise, and your undeniable goodness.

Your pastor and friend,

John

IT'S HAPPENING AT CCM

April, 2018

Although our fellowship usually gathers on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month, in APRIL, we will assemble on the 1st and 4th Sunday.

Sunday, April 1 (1st Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. EASTER SUNDAY WORSHIP

A majority of Christians consider Easter to be the most important Sunday in the church year—and for good reason. It is a day on which resurrection, the continuation of life *beyond* this life, is proclaimed. But there are a number of good people, serious followers of the pathway of Jesus, who struggle to see how resurrection could be possible. They *want* to believe in resurrection, but they have difficulty understanding how a dead physical body can get up a walk, talk, and think again. But even if we have heard that proclaimed from a number of pulpits, what if that's not what resurrection means? What if we and our loved ones *do* continue our journey beyond this life—but without our *needing* a physical body? John will help us to look at some frequently ignored biblical insights (from Paul and Jesus), together with some impressive scientific evidence, that may revolutionize our thinking and make believers out of all of us! His sermon is entitled “BELIEVING THE UNBELIEVABLE BELIEVABLY.”

As is our custom, we do not have our usual Q and A or discussion following worship on Easter Sunday. Traditionally, many people have out-of-town family visiting on Easter; so, if *you* do, we value the opportunity to help you maximize your limited time together. We plan to adjourn by 11:30 a.m. or before.

Sunday, April 22 (4th Sunday of the Month)**10:00 a.m. ENLIGHTENMENT: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION**

Today, we come to the end of our Lenten/Easter celebration and resume our series that enables us to think about how best and most responsibly we can apply *spiritual* principles to our decision making about a variety of *contemporary* issues—*most* of which the majority of churches consistently avoid! At CCM, we do not treat you as children by telling you *what* to believe or by *avoiding* important issues on which not everyone can agree. Instead, we protect, honor and offer you the gift of freedom to think for yourself and to agree *or* disagree—just as Jesus did with all of the people with whom *he* came in contact! Indeed, it is in our ability as God’s people to share *different* perspectives that we have an opportunity lovingly to learn from one another, expand our awareness, and grow spiritually.

Since Mother’s Day will be coming up in May, we’ll be able more fully to deepen our awareness and actually to *grow* spiritually as we explore the lively but challenging issue of “RIGHT TO LIFE—OR RIGHT TO CHOOSE?”. Of course, almost everybody *already* has an opinion on that matter, but few of us (if any) have arrived at our position based on *spiritual* principles. Today, at CCM, we’ll have what may be a valuable, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do so.

(Adjournment: Between 11:30 a.m. and 12 Noon, depending upon the time needed for meaningful discussion)

ADDENDUM

TO THE PASTOR’S PARAGRAPHS

As you will recall, the Pastor's Paragraphs in this newsletter focused on "Keeping Open to the Holy"—*maintaining* a thread of connection with the Sacred.

There are two ways in which we can open ourselves to that which is ultimate. One is by opening ourselves to KNOWLEDGE—accumulated spiritual wisdom. The other is by opening ourselves to personal EXPERIENCE of the Holy. There are people—perhaps a majority—who attend church regularly and have accumulated a great deal of what they assume to be KNOWLEDGE (biblical teachings, doctrines, denominational emphases, etc.), but they claim never to have had a personal EXPERIENCE of God. Why is that so prevalent?

The truth is that the world is filled with *distractions*, any number of things that can divert our attention from that which is *most* important, and we allow those sometimes very *good* things to become our *primary* preoccupation. Research indicates that persons who tell us that they have never had a personal EXPERIENCE of God tend usually to place their predominant emphasis upon the *physical* or *material* aspects of reality rather than their interior, spiritual, or core being.

A simple example of how we easily can become sidetracked by potentially good things is by our having a special interest that we allow to claim most of our attention, time, thought, and energy. Also, there is the tendency to plan family get-togethers, athletic events, or social opportunities with friends that take the place of our *prioritizing* regular presence in a good spiritual community. Another issue for many people is staying up so late on Saturday night that we feel a need to "sleep in" on Sunday morning. But the most basic hindrance of all to a deep, meaningful experience of the Holy is our tendency not to take seriously the guidance of Jesus concerning the importance of putting the kingdom of God (spiritual values) *FIRST* in our lives *and* in our *schedule*. Jesus always prioritized the spiritual over all else and called his followers to do likewise. We rarely admit to ourselves that we are not *truly* a follower of his—perhaps only a "sort of" follower—until *we* do so. For Jesus, in order to EXPERIENCE the Holy, it was important to keep open all potential *doors* to the Holy, lest we unintentionally exclude it;

and, as we have seen, for him that involved both a *private* spiritual community (one of limited size that *he* initiated) and a *public* spiritual community (a more diverse group open to everyone).

In *selecting* a public group, an already existing church in which to participate regularly, it is crucial to do so by making the kingdom of God (spiritual values) our *primary* consideration. That means that we will not choose to go to a church just because we have friends there, like the music—the choir, the organ, or the architecture—the stained glass windows or furnishings, the gymnasium, the family life center, the athletic program, or even social opportunities for our children (as if they didn't already have those in school, with abundant extracurricular activities, and friends available in the neighborhood). If we take both Jesus and Paul seriously, the most *important* spiritual value, as mentioned earlier, should be *the potential for transformation*, for growth into greater spiritual maturity. Our pastor has observed that he has many good friends whom he adores that do not go to church. They really *are* good people. But most of them seem not to have grown spiritually *beyond* a point at which they were many years ago. So, without realizing it, that is the usually unrecognized price those wonderful people pay for not keeping open available doors to the Holy. They plateau! For the rest of us, it may be of little value simply to attend “some church.” What *is* of great value is to become involved in a church that will help *us* not to plateau!

If recognition of what one has missed by not being involved in a qualitative spiritual community ever takes place, it sometimes is too late to do anything about it. In one of our pastor's former churches, there was a lady who had been a member of his church for many years, but she frequently allowed other interests to keep her away from opportunities to *experience* God personally. Her attendance was spotty, at best, and she was absent more than she was present. The time came, as it could for any of us, when her health failed and she was *unable* to come to church. After a few months, she began to think about all of the opportunities for spiritual growth that she had missed, and she told our pastor that she wanted to begin to be present in worship every Sunday, as soon as she got well. Unfortunately, though, she died before her desire could be implemented. She was a good person, and

John still misses her deeply; but *equally* deeply, he regrets the potential opportunities to encounter the Holy that she missed. Without our human vulnerability to a world full of many interests and distractions, maybe the rich potential she missed and finally *yearned* to experience could have been realized.

But what if the experience of John's former church member can be helpful to others? What if some of *us* who have yet to put the spiritual values of the Kingdom of God first in *our* life can *learn* from her? If so, because she was truly a very special individual, she would be pleased. The lesson, as John's article clearly indicated, is not to demean, ignore or denigrate the physical and material aspects of reality, but to make sure that neither they nor other valid interests divert our attention from that which is *most* important.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

EASTER AT CCM

Before you forget, you might want to indicate on your calendar that *this* month, our fellowship will gather for Easter worship on April 1st. That, of course, is the *first* Sunday of the month *instead* of our usual meeting time on the second Sunday. We'll look forward to seeing you as, together, we share another potential opening to the Holy.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PRAYERS!

Two of our valuable people recently have had operations. As you know, Heidi Turner had surgery on one of her legs which she broke attempting to get in her car to come to CCM. She is recovering nicely, can now put weight on her injured leg and, if possible, anticipates having a member of her family bring her to church on Easter Sunday. We hope her plans materialize, because we have greatly missed her.

Also, Bob Nolan, one of our very faithful attendees until he moved out of town, recently returned to Columbia to undergo extensive surgery on his

back and neck. Afterward, he was in intensive care for a period of time but now is recovering beautifully. He has now moved from Lexington Medical Center to a West Columbia rehabilitation facility to receive physical therapy. We wish him well as he moves toward a well-deserved, pain free new life.

Both of the aforementioned dear people deeply appreciate your every prayer on their behalf. As one of them said, “It is always a spirit-lifter to know that you are in the thoughts and prayers of a caring community.”

CCM:

**KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN
FOR THE HOLY...**

**MAKING IT POSSIBLE TO CONNECT
MORE *DEEPLY*
WITH GOD—AND WITH ONE ANOTHER
*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:

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

or

CommunityChurchOfTheMidlands.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 I-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!