

# Being A Church



## Rollstone Congregational Church

**United Church of Christ**

199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

Pastor: Rev. David B. Hanks 978-821-9571

Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

# **Fifth Sunday in Lent**

## **March 29, 2020**

### **Gathering Thoughts:**

Dear Brothers and Sisters we continue to be the church in a difficult time and situation. We can continue to be the church even though we are practicing Social Distancing through acts of charity and love. I feel for each of you with your varied reactions to what is happening. It is important that we work with each other, the medical community, and the government so that this virus can be contained and eradicated. Until we meet again or go to a live digital service, please be safe and protect yourselves. Please feel free to share this service with others who may not have the same opportunity to worship

### **The Gathering:**

Come to this place wherever you may be.

Be with each other in the Spirit of the Divine Creator.

Share in love of Christ.

Experience the Christ of faith.

Know that God cares for you,

That we are bound together

Through the Holy Spirit which is a beautiful living thing.

Take this time and experience of worship and use it

To become more than you are right now.

You are a gift.

Use and share the gift. AMEN.

### **A Time of Prayer:**

We bask in the healing power of your love, O God. You are always with us. You are with us when we cry out in fear. You are with us when we are discouraged. You are with us when we are alone. You are with us all the time, day and night. For your presence, we are most thankful. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Reading from the Scriptures:**

#### **Psalms 100**

**New International Version (NIV)**

#### **A psalm. For giving grateful praise.**

**1** Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

**2** Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come before him with joyful songs.

**3** Know that the Lord is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;

- we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.
- 4** Enter his gates with thanksgiving  
and his courts with praise;  
give thanks to him and praise his name.
- 5** For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;  
his faithfulness continues through all generations.

## **2 Corinthians 4:7-10**

**New International Version (NIV)**

**7** But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. **8** We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; **9** persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. **10** We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

### **A Message concerning the Dangers of Social Distancing - based upon Psalm 100 and 2 Corinthians 4:7-10**

*(This message is taken from Homiletics.com in a special edition offered to pastors and congregations. The material included is used with permission. May this offer you hope and purpose as we journey through a difficult situation.)*

With the coronavirus spreading, we are wise to practice social distancing. But do not fall into isolation, which can lead to despair.

The coronavirus is afflicting us, perplexing us and even striking some of us down. Schools are closing, restaurants are shutting down and congregations are no longer gathering for worship. Stress, anxiety and fear are being felt in homes across our country and around the world.

Coronavirus is a real threat, and people exposed to the virus are being advised to self-quarantine. In addition, everyone is being asked to maintain physical distance from others to control the spread of the virus. But there is danger in social distancing.

At Christ Church in Washington, D.C., the rector has fallen ill and been hospitalized with COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019). The mayor of D.C. issued a public health advisory urging the rector's 500 worshipers to self-quarantine for 14 days, and worship services at Christ Church have been canceled for the foreseeable future.

According to The Washington Post, church members have decided to quarantine themselves voluntarily until the danger passes. Many feel a sense of duty to their neighbors and the public to do whatever they can to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

The congregation is "highly motivated," said church member Sally Wilhelm, a former health reporter for The Washington Post. "This is a population that has been involved in a lot of public service and cares a lot about the country." They are, in the words of Paul to the Corinthians, "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair

... struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

Church members admit, however, that most of them are in the enviable position of having money and ample sick leave. They know that if they weren’t getting paid while away from work, it would be much harder to self-quarantine.

In Italy, religious services have been suspended for weeks, in keeping with government rulings to curb the coronavirus. “The suspensions have generated some strange outcomes,” reports The New York Times. “Until this past weekend, the Milan Cathedral was open to tourists, but not to worshippers. Even weekday Mass was prohibited, even though it typically attracts smaller crowds than the average bar.”

Italians have been told to watch offerings of Sunday Mass on local TV or online, even though a broadcast version of a service is not the same as a live version. Similar guidance is being given in Japan, South Korea and Iran. Saudi Arabia has taken the unprecedented step of suspending pilgrimages to the holy sites of Islam. Such restrictions are moving across the United States as well, as the virus spreads.

No one disputes “the need to strictly limit ritual gatherings and comply with public safety regulations,” writes Mattia Ferraresi in The New York Times. “But for believers, religion is a fundamental source of spiritual healing and hope. It’s a remedy against despair, providing psychological and emotional support that is an integral part of well-being.” It is also an antidote to loneliness.

In worship, we are reminded that “the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” When we give thanks to God and bless his name, we know that “the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations” (Psalm 100:3-5). The assurance that we are God’s people and the sheep of God’s pasture is a fundamental source of hope for us. God’s steadfast love and faithfulness are a remedy against despair and the foundation of our well-being.

So how do we continue to worship and serve the Lord in a time of social distancing?

## **Online Worship**

Congregations need to care for themselves and the wider community by taking steps to slow the spread of the virus. This means practicing good hygiene, refraining from hand-shaking, maintaining a physical distance from people in public, and avoiding large gatherings — including coming together in person for worship. By maintaining social distance on Sunday mornings, we are actually demonstrating that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

But moving to online worship is challenging. Not everyone is comfortable with worship by live-stream, YouTube, Zoom, Facebook Live or some other technology. We would rather be together in person than watching a service on a computer or smartphone.

Even with these challenges, we can have meaningful online worship



by maintaining our normal order for worship. Church members need the certainty of established traditions in an uncertain time. Messages of comfort can provide psychological and emotional support. Prayers for strength and healing can lead to personal and communal well-being. Enabling people to send their prayer concerns by email or phone can reduce isolation and build a sense of community, overcoming the danger of social distancing. Online services should also include Scripture and music, since we need the guidance and reassurance of all of our worship elements during this stressful time.

In addition, since people will want to support the mission and ministry of the church during a time of separation, guidance needs to be given on how people can mail their gifts to the church or make online offerings. Just a few Sundays without an offering can cripple the budgets of many congregations.

## **Mission to the Community**

The closing of a church building does not mean that mission to the community has to cease. Concern for hungry neighbors has inspired Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Virginia to install “Little Free Pantries” outside their church building. These boxes used to be “Little Free Libraries” containing books for neighbors to borrow, read and return. But in this COVID-19 crisis, they have been repainted and repurposed.

Now, these “Little Free Pantries” contain canned goods and other non-perishable food, and hungry neighbors are welcome to come by and pick up food. Church members are encouraged to add contributions to the pantries at any time, and such mission efforts are a satisfying activity for parents who want to get out of the house with their children.

Mission to the community can continue, even in a time of social distancing. Yes, mission may take some unexpected forms, but it remains a sign of God’s light in a dark world. “We have this treasure in clay jars,” said the apostle Paul, “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7). Find the “clay jar” mission project that allows light to shine in your community.

## **Congregational Care**

A public health crisis such as COVID-19 is an important time to be the church! Although church members are right to practice social distancing to prevent the spread of the virus, this is not the time to become isolated. Continue to reach out to fellow members and neighbors through phone calls, texts, emails and video chats. Activate the deacons or other caregivers in the church to make phone calls to older members in particular, since they might be particularly vulnerable to the danger of social distancing. Pastors should share their contact information widely, and let members know that they are happy to respond by email or telephone, and to meet in small groups as needed.

Paul’s words have special significance for us in this time of COVID-19: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven

to despair ... struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Corinthians 4:8-10). Yes, even in this time of being afflicted, perplexed and struck down, we can continue to trust in the Lord of steadfast love and faithfulness. The coronavirus does not have to crush us, drive us to despair or destroy us, because our powerful God is always working to heal us, help us and work for our well-being.

In addition, we are the body of Christ in the world today, and the life of Jesus can always be made visible in our bodies, through what we say and do. Jesus continues to live through us when we reach out with his love, in acts as simple as keeping in touch via phone calls and online communication. Even in a time of social distancing, we can continue to worship God and serve our neighbors, because Jesus himself has promised to be with us, to work through us, and to never let us go.

**A Time of Prayer** – *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

## **PRAYER LIST**

**Jack Brigham**

**Becky Colwell**

**Cathy Fontaine**

**Chuck Funk**

**Paula Gaudet**

**Bob and Pat Goguen**

**Sarah Kee**

**Kyle, a.k.a, Kippy**

**Bob and Doris Lane**

**Linda Long**

**Lorraine Michaud**

**Cathie Perra**

**Maria Piazza**

**Melanie Pouliot**

**Alex Robinson**

**Del Sampson**

**Elwin Shepard**

**Ron Smith  
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry  
Donna Thorne  
Patty Westerman**

**All who are lonely or depressed**

**All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus**

**Those who are currently unemployed because of the virus**

**All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders**

**Those whose livelihoods have been impacted through lost jobs or  
reduced financial stability**

**Our government – that they may make timely and wise decisions**

**Our Church and all of its members**

Let us pray .....Gracious and loving Creator, Sometimes the words just are not there. God, you are so amazing that our words and thoughts of how best to praise you pale in comparison to the splendors of your name. You are the Almighty, you are the Redeemer, you are grace never ending and the embodiment of love itself. And when we come to you in prayer, sometimes words fail us in what to say. Yes, we lift up our concerns, and yet sometimes they seem so small in comparison to the tribulations encountered across your creation. How can our problems compare to disasters people face, or the fighting that surrounds people trying to escape, or the horrors that no child should ever experience? Lord God, sometimes when we come to you to pray, we are clueless as to what we should ask for. You know the thoughts in our minds and the desires of our hearts, and there are times when they conflict. Sometimes we want what is not always the best for us, and there are times that we long to hold on to the things we should let go of. There are times when really the best thing we can do is just pray thy will be done. In these moments, dear God, we are so very thankful for the lessons of your Son Jesus Christ for teaching us the words to pray when our own are insufficient, for our tradition teaches that Jesus said to pray to Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

### **Benediction**

Do not be dismayed by the brokenness in the world.

All things break.

And all things can be mended.

Not with time, as they say, but with intention.

So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally.

The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.