

COMMUNION SUNDAY



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

Friends in Christ,

As we are separated by distance we still need to engage in being the church. It is not easy for any of us, but by the grace and mercy of God, we will endure and rise like a phoenix out of the ashes. We missed the opportunity to be together in retelling the story of the Last Supper.

In this week's service we will be sharing the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. I invite each of you to prepare before reading the service to get a piece of bread or cracker and a cup of juice or wine. When you arrive at the portion of the service to break the bread and share in the cup, please follow this part of the liturgy.

Brothers and sisters come and gather at this table as you are. Partake and share. For this meal is spread for you and me that we might again know that God has come to us, shared our common lot, and invites us to join with the people of God.

(Take a moment to say a personal prayer of confession)

Bless us, O God, by your Holy Spirit these gifts of bread and wine. May our receiving of them unite us together as we strive to be the living Christ to each other and the world. Amen.

(Take a piece of bread and say.)

This is the body of Christ broken for all.

(Take the cup of juice/wine and say.)

This is the cup of the new salvation poured out for all.

Prayer – Almighty God, thank you for this opportunity to share this meal with our Brothers and Sisters in these difficult days. Strengthen us until we shall all gather around the Lord's Table to celebrate this the Lord's Feast. Amen.

Third Sunday after Easter

May 3, 2020

Prelude:

“Et Valde Mane”

Thomas Anderson

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters we gather today in spirit to celebrate the community that God has called us to be. While we are maintaining distance because of a virus, God has us experiencing the love and warmth of being a community of faith. We rejoice today in the knowledge that God surrounds us with hope and urges us to remain united in the same spirit as if we were sitting side by side. May this separation end soon so that we can share in the communion feast that God shares with us. Don't forget to send in your prayer requests so that they may be added to the prayer list of Joys and Concerns.

Please feel free to share this service with others who may not have the same opportunity to worship.

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

Leader: God remembers and visits us and restores us to the community of faith.

People: **In our pain, suffering and loss, we know the assurance of God's presence.**

Leader: When we have opposition and hopeless situations, God bears us up on eagles' wings.

People: **In the loneliness of our firm idealism, God grants healing and transformation.**

Leader: Whatever we need as we gather to worship, a merciful and loving God meets us here.

People: **We assemble with high expectations that God has much good in store for us.**

Leader: The good gifts God bestows on us here are for our use in reaching out to others.

People: **We want to use our talents in the service of Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Opening Hymn:

“I Come with Joy”

Brian Wren

**I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven, loved and free,
in awe and wonder to recall his life laid down for me, his life laid down
for me.**

I come with Christians far and near to find, as all are fed,

the new community of love in Christ's communion bread, in Christ's communion bread.

**As Christ breaks bread and bids us share, each proud division ends.
The love that makes us one, and strangers now are friends, and strangers
now are friends.**

**And thus with joy we meet our Lord. His presence, always near.
Is in such friendship better known; we see and praise him here, we see
and praise him here.**

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A Time of Prayer:

You have brought us, O God, to another Lord's Day, when we are privileged to worship you with our brothers and sisters in Christ. May we have unity of mind and heart as we open ourselves to the movement of your Holy Spirit. As your love grows within us, may we have rich fellowship with you and with one another. In Christ's name. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

2 Timothy 1:1-14 (NIV)

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

²To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

³I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. ⁶For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

⁸Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, ⁹who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. ¹¹For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, ¹²and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. ¹³Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

The Message:

“A Community Stays in Touch”

When you want to reject an experience or an idea as ridiculous or silly, what do you say? Don't we often label it as “touchy-feely”? Gushy, emotional, illogical displays are dismissed as “touchy-feely.” Partly this is because our dominant responses are products of a “non-contact culture” (North Americans, Northern Europeans, Asians). We are far more comfortable with wrapping our minds around an idea than with flinging our arms around a person.

In more physically demonstrative “contact cultures” (Arabs, Latin Americans, Southern Europeans), touch is as much a part of communication as are words. Backslapping, cheek kissing, bear hugging and hand holding are the grammatical rules of a contact-culture language. But for most of us in the United States, and especially within the sanctuaries of our faith communities, we are far too hung up on the “tact” in “tactile.” Ours is a “hands-off” culture. A “Don't touch me” spirit pervades both the sacred and the secular spaces in our lives. Consider this: The United States is one of the few countries where massages are still not covered by health insurance. The overwhelming cultural message here is that we're no “soft touch” and that “touching” is just for “softies.”

Despite our rigid-necked, straight-backed, stiff-armed approach to getting touched and being in touch, the health benefits of touch have been clearly proven by our own hard-nosed scientific methods. Tactile stimulation is a powerful stimulant to infant growth and development. Babies who are held more both gain weight and master basic motor skills faster than babies who receive less holding and touching. Fortunately for babies, their small bodies and soft skin make us naturally want to touch them, hold them close and snuggle them.

But studies also show that the elderly benefit from touch in much the same way. Among those who received regular touching, from massages to hugs to holding hands, the following was found: Their motor skills remained sharper, their mental abilities continued to be acute, and their general state of health was better than among those who reported virtually no physical contact with others. The touch didn't even have to be human. The simple act of petting a dog or stroking a cat seems to help our physiological need for physical contact.

For the past many years we have been in retreat from touching. We have been posting “hands-off” signs at schools, workplaces, even at home and at church. And for good reason. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people have been scarred by inappropriate touch in school, at work, and even in the church. Yet, our text suggests that NOT touching is also at least a form of neglect, at worst a form of actual abuse.

A conductor from Eastern Europe was being interviewed after having spent years in isolation because of his political views. After the usual series of political and personal questions, the reporter took a surprising turn: “What in your opinion is the most beautiful piece of music ever written?” The maestro thought for a while, and did not answer. “While you were held

in isolation,” the reporter pressed further, “what did you want most to hear? What music would you at that moment have thought the most beautiful to hear?” The maestro perked up: “In the whole world?” “Yes, in the whole world,” the reporter replied. “In all the world,” the conductor said with tears in his eyes, “the most beautiful music is the sound of another voice.”

Paul would have agreed wholeheartedly with this musician’s judgment. Imprisoned, alone, cut off physically from those he most loved and from the churches he had helped nurture into existence, Paul’s emotional longings speak clearly throughout 2 Timothy. Though physically isolated, Paul spiritually connects himself to his own past -- getting back “in touch” with the grounding strength and support of his Jewish ancestors’ faith -- a heritage that allows him to celebrate the fact that he has always worshiped the one, true God. Paul then reminds Timothy that he, too, has a heritage of faithfulness that will keep him “in touch,” “in Christ,” no matter what the challenge. For Timothy, the line is drawn matriarchally -- from grandmother to mother to himself. In Timothy’s family, it is a common faith -- not business, not money, not things -- that keeps one generation in touch with the next.

Yet another way Paul reached out to his disciple is through the power of a remembered touch. Paul recalls for Timothy how he was filled with God’s spirit of power and love and self-discipline through the ritual of the laying on of Paul’s own hands. This symbolic touch forever joined together Timothy and Paul as brothers in Christ and for Christ’s mission to the world.

Tell me: How is it that the church, which owes its very existence to the power of a touch passed from one generation to the next, could have become so out of touch with its own membership, with its own body? The Christbody community needs to proudly reclaim its “touchy-feely” heritage and heart. It is only when we allow ourselves to touch and be touched that we can feel whether a living, vital pulse-beat of faith is coursing through our sanctuaries.

Without touching, who can tell whether our churches are dead or alive? Can we trust the message sent by our eyes? Does having a beautiful building or a state-of-the-art sanctuary automatically mean that there is a strong spiritual pulse? To demonstrate how easily the eye can be fooled, philosopher John Locke offered the simple, classic example of an oar in the water. While the oar appears to be crooked, distinctly bent at the waterline, it, of course, feels straight -- as it actually is. When the sense of sight is deceived, the sense of touch tells the truth.

Can your faith pass the “pinch test”? If you touch it, is it real?

- When touched by another’s suffering, do you weep?
- When touched by another’s joy, do you laugh?
- When touched by another’s pain, do you ache?
- When touched by another’s warmth, are you comforted?
- When touched by another’s coldness, are you chilled?
- When touched by another’s sorrow, do you mourn?

--When touched by another's love, do you multiply that love and send it on?

Jesus promised perfect freedom comes not to those who do as they please, but to those who love as they should.

What is it God wants from us?

Does God want us to think the right thoughts?

Does God want us to do the right things?

Or does God want us to be in the right relationships -- with God, with each other, with ourselves, with creation -- relationships based on truth and trust and touch? Any religion that announces God is Love is about relationships! It is the relationships that produce the right thoughts and right actions. Relationships come first.

Paul's heartfelt words to Timothy combined the touch of a genuine agape relationship between believers with the saving touch of grace offered by Christ. Paul and Timothy and all those who are together with them "in Christ" share in the saving event of Christ's resurrection. That is the divine touch of pure love as it was embodied by Christ on the cross for our sake.

Biblically speaking, to be saved means to become bonded to a community. Other cultures can understand this better than we can. In Africa, hell doesn't mean other people, as Sartre said it did. Rather, hell means being removed from other people, being thrown out of a community. In India, when one marries, you join in a relationship, not just to another person, but to an entire family.

When we step outside our community and try to go it on our own, to live entirely upon our own judgment, we inevitably get into trouble. In the familiar story of Adam and Eve, did you ever stop and notice just when the Serpent works on seducing Adam and Eve? It is when they were separate, apart from each other, not in direct relationship. The Serpent employed the first example we have of the divide and conquer technique.

The snake in the grass is still at work. Thirty million Americans (one out of three church members) join a church and then drop out. Why? Charles Arn did a study of why United Methodists left. He found that the primary reason the majority (75 percent) left had nothing to do with theology. It was relational. People just didn't feel wanted and didn't get bonded to the community.

How does one receive faith? Through others! How does one receive strength for the journey? Through others! How does one find healing from the wounds along the way? Through others! No matter how sophisticated our modes of travel may have now become, the need for journeying together, for keeping in touch, is still a pivotal human need.

If you were one of 90 million people who watched the final Sein-off of the Seinfeld show, you know that the show ended as it began: a story of a group of utterly self-absorbed friends who make something out of nothing, a sitcom creatio ex nihilo. We watched them in the courtroom after they failed to help an overweight carjacking victim. Unwilling to touch or be touched, Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer listen as a parade of witnesses testify against

them. The four are charged with “criminal indifference” and sent to prison to contemplate their shallow lives.

Even after they land behind bars, the callousness, self-centeredness and indifference to humanity continue. The mindless chatter about nothing continues. George complains about poor service from the guards. Elaine frets about how not to make a phoning faux pas when calling a friend from her cell. Jerry gives a show for his fellow inmates. Kramer fidgets. Yada yada yada.

Is this to be the verdict against the church: Criminal Indifference? Or is the phrase “Indifferent Christian” an oxymoron? Christians, in fact, can do nothing but be in relation with those who are around them, whether a carjacking victim, the visitor at church, the homebound neighbor up the street, one’s aged parents, one’s wayward children, longtime friend or short-term acquaintance. To touch and stay in touch is Christian behavior. Touching is the soul-river that runs it -- through our Christ-community of faith.

A piece of graffiti on a New York subway wall expresses the idea:

You can punch my lips so I can’t blow my horn,
but my fingers will find a piano.
You can slam the piano lid on my fingers,
but you can’t stop my toes from tapping like a drum.
You can stomp on my feet to keep my toes from tapping,
but my heart will keep swinging in four/four time.
You can even stop my heart from ticking,
but the music of the saints shall never cease.
(William G. Carter, “Singing a New Song: The Gospel and Jazz,” The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, xix, no. 1 [1998], 46.)

And this is the point: No matter what the challenges that confront us every day, our lips can still blow the horn of praise, our fingers can still play a melody of joy, our toes can keep tapping the song of encouragement, the heart can still swing to the song of the Spirit. This kind of kinetic, stay-in-touch church will march to the “music of the saints [which] shall never cease.”

We in the church are a touchy-feely people. Let’s stay that way.

Organ Interlude: “What a Friend we Have in Jesus” T. M. Schuller

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

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Paula Gaudet
Bob and Pat Goguen
Linda Hurd
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Family of Rev. Edward R. Neuhaus
Cathie Perra
Maria Piazza
Melanie Pouliot
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne
Marilyn Wales
Patty Westerman
All who are experiencing difficult times and situations
All who are lonely or depressed
All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus
All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders
Those whose livelihoods have been impacted through lost jobs or
reduced financial stability
Our Church and all of its members

As we enter into this time of prayer, O God, we offer our gratitude that you are always present to us. Instill in us a desire to listen to others. Help us

listen with open hearts and open minds, that people might feel safe in our presence. Instill in us a spirit of serenity that others might feel accepted in your nonjudgmental grace. Free us from the tendency to label people and ideas, and allow us instead to lean into mercy and kindness. In the stillness of these moments, we acknowledge the times when we have been less than kind, merciful and open. Thank you for never banning us from your presence, loving God; help us so to love and accept others. And now we ask, O God, that you will remember all of those on our prayer list and those in our hearts. These are our prayers as we remember those words that Jesus taught us pray in saying.....“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.”

Communion – the sharing in the Broken Bread and Cup of Salvation

Communion Interlude: “God’s Holy Gifts” Dan Schutte

Eat this bread as we remember him. (take and eat of a piece of bread)

Drink of the cup of salvation as we remember him. (take a drink from the cup – juice or wine)

Closing Hymn:

“Let There Be Peace on Earth” S. Miller and J. Jackson

**Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me;
let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be.**

With God as our Father, children all are we.

Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me; let this be the moment now.

**With every step I take, let this be my solemn vow:
to take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally.
Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.**

Benediction:

The way is long; let us go together.

The way is difficult; let us help each other.

The way is joyful; let us share it.

The way is Christ’s, for Christ is the Way; let us follow.

The way is open before us; let us go: with the love of God, the grace of Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Postlude: “Rigaudon” Andre Campra