



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

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein

Fourth Sunday after Easter

May 10, 2020

Prelude:

“Priere A Notre Dame”

Leon Boëllmann

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters we gather today in spirit to support our community that God has created. As we are distanced by a virus we are not separated because of our love for one another. We rejoice in the knowledge that God is with us and continues to watch over us and answers our prayers. May you continue to see signs of God’s grace and mercy as this difficult continues. 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:

Praise the Lord, who has shown us the wonders of his unfailing love; and who, for the sake of his name, leads us and guides us.

In you, O Lord, we put our trust. You are our God, and our lives are in your hands. Lord, let the light of your face shine on us as we celebrate together in your presence. Amen.

Opening Hymn: “It’s Me, It’s Me, O Lord” Afro-American spiritual

(Refrain)

It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, O Lord,

Standin’ in the need of prayer.

It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, O Lord,

Standin’ in the need of prayer.

Not my brother or my sister, but it’s me, O Lord,

Standin’ in the need of prayer.

Not my brother or my sister, but it’s me, O Lord,

Standin’ in the need of prayer.

(Refrain)

Not my mother or my father, but it’s me, O Lord,

Standin’ in the need of prayer.

Not my mother or my father, but it’s me, O Lord,

Standin’ in the need of prayer.

(Refrain)

*Not my stranger or my neighbour, but it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer.*

*Not my stranger or my neighbour, but it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer.*

A Time of Prayer:

God of the resurrection, we thank you for the new life you have given Jesus and all who follow him. Through the power of your Spirit, inspire us to make a leap of faith into your loving arms. May we believe the words of Scripture when they speak of your victory over death, and may we accept the promises you make for the future. We praise you for your love, your joy and your wonderful living hope - hope that points us to a future that we cannot see, but that we believe you will guide us through. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16 (NIV)

1 In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.

2 Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.

Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.

3 You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,

4 take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.

5 Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

15 My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

16 Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.

Hymn: "Prayer Is the Soul's Sincere Desire"

James Montgomery

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered, or unexpressed;
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

Prayer is the simplest form of speech
That infant lips can try;
Prayer, the sublimest strains that reach
The Majesty so high.

Prayer is the contrite sinner's voice,
turning from thoughtless ways,
While angels in their songs rejoice
and cry, "Behold, one prays!"

No prayers do humans make alone;
the Holy Spirit pleads,
And Jesus on the eternal throne
for sinners intercedes.

O Christ, by whom we come to God,
The Life, the Truth, the Way,
The path of prayer you too have trod:
Christ, teach us how to pray.

The Message: "The Value of Prayer"

Thoughts and prayers. Some people find them valuable, while others would actually pay to avoid them.

A recent study found that Christians generally value the offer of thoughts and prayers, even from a stranger. Two sociologists studied a group of North Carolina residents in the fall of 2018 after Hurricane Florence struck. They talked with more than 400 residents, asking them to describe the hardships they had suffered. Then they made an offer of a thought or a prayer, and they tied the offer to money.

What did they discover? Christians valued prayer from a stranger, putting its worth at more than \$4. The nonreligious participants, however, said that they would pay more than \$3.50 to avoid a Christian stranger's prayer.

This finding "raises an interesting point," said a Denver psychologist. "Some people, maybe, just don't want your thoughts and prayers." Perhaps they are atheists or agnostics, who do not believe in the power of prayer. Or maybe they feel that the offer of a prayer is a platitude, one that takes the place of meaningful action.

Even within the Christian community, many faithful people desire a strong link between words and actions. In his New Testament letter, James writes, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to

them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?' (James 2:15-16). Faith without works, according to James, is dead.

In a similar manner, many Christians today will argue that prayer without action is dead. Consider the mothers being honored today on Mother's Day. Are they going to be happy with thoughts and prayers? Probably not. They want a visit or a call and maybe a card or gift. And many men will feel the same on Father's Day.

Loving action is what is needed, with good reason.

But not every human need can be met with gifts of clothing, food or other contributions. At times, nothing really can be offered except thoughts and prayers. Think of a relative dying of a terminal illness. Or a friend going through a divorce. Or a family member who is feeling deeply discouraged.

Yes, we can visit them, listen to them, love them and support them. But there is not much we can do to remove, mitigate or solve their problems. Thoughts and prayers are what we have to offer.

All of which raises the question, "What is the real value of prayer?" Most of us would argue that it is worth more than \$4. But what specifically are our prayer values? What is the true value of prayer?

For starters, prayer changes us. More than changing the outcome of the situation in front of us — whether it is a natural disaster or a terminal illness — prayer changes our relationship with God. Psalm 31 is a prayer for deliverance, and it includes the appeal to God: "Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me" (v. 2).

This prayer is all about the deepening of a relationship. It asks for God to hear us and rescue us, and it requests that God be a rock of refuge, a place of safety and stability, a mighty fortress, a location of salvation. What it does not request is a change to the situation being faced.

A few years ago, a group called American Atheists put up a billboard outside the Super Bowl, which said, "A 'Hail Mary' only works in football." Then the group issued a press release that said, "It's time to stop believing that prayer works."

The atheists had a point. Fans should not pray for their team to win. Players should not ask God to help them catch a pass or get the ball into the end zone. Prayer does not change the outcome of football games.

But the American Atheists were wrong to say that prayer does not work. Prayer changes the people who pray, making them more peaceful, accepting and connected to Almighty God. “You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name’s sake lead me and guide me,” says Psalm 31 in its appeal to God. (v. 3). Prayer doesn’t change the path of hurricanes or the outcome of sporting events, but it does change us. It draws us into a deeper relationship with the God who saves us, even as it asks for God’s leadership and guidance.

One of the most well-known modern prayers is the Serenity Prayer, said first by Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr during World War II. It is now central to the recovery from addiction being achieved in thousands of 12-step groups: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

Notice that God is not being asked in this prayer to miraculously eliminate a desire for alcohol or narcotics. Instead, God is being asked to give serenity, courage and wisdom to people so that they can become well. As is said in a book called *How Al-Anon Works*, “We turn to the God of our understanding for the attributes necessary to live life more fully.”

In other words, praying people turn to God and ask for help to live better lives. By praying to God in this way, millions of people have become sober through 12-step groups across our country and around the world. In each of these groups, the Serenity Prayer is said to change the hearts and minds of people, not the heart and mind of God.

Another value of prayer is that it gives us skills to face the challenges of life. With the mid-winter Super Bowl behind us, our thoughts might be turning to springtime and baseball. Sadly, prayer does not mean that pitchers will suddenly be able to throw 100-mile-per-hour fastballs, or that batters will be able to knock curveballs out of the park. Prayer rarely — okay, never — changes the speed of a ball or the swing of a bat.

But baseball players who pray for serenity, courage and wisdom will find their prayers answered, and they will be given the attributes they need to be the best players they can possibly be. “In baseball, if you’re batting .300, you’re a star,” says Stephen Rossetti, chaplain to the World Champion Washington Nationals, “and that means the other two times you’re striking out. The point is: Hang in there, stay in the fight.” The same is true for each of us. Whether you are facing a tough situation in a ball game, at school, at home or in the office, mental and emotional health is always going to be an asset. Hang in there. Pray for serenity, courage and wisdom.

Eileen Flanagan has written a book on the Serenity Prayer called *The Wisdom to Know the Difference*. In it, she quotes a study which found that

wise people “are able to step outside themselves and assess a troubling situation with calm reflection. They recast a crisis as a problem to be addressed, a puzzle to be solved. They take action in situations they can control and accept the inability to do so when matters are outside their control.”

These are the kinds of challenges that professional athletes face, and that we face as well when we encounter health challenges, relationship troubles and crises of various kinds. “My times are in your hand,” says the writer of Psalm 31. “Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love” (vv. 15-16). We are going to experience the greatest serenity when we know that everything we face is in God’s hands. On top of this, we can handle problems most effectively when we believe that God is with us, working to save us, in every time and place and situation.

Another value of prayer is that it aligns us with the will of God for healing and wholeness in human life. God wants us all to have serenity, courage and wisdom — regardless of the particular challenges we face. And when life is overwhelming, we can pray for God to rescue us and save us (v. 2). God wants to save us from the worst that life can throw at us, even death itself. Serenity comes from the knowledge that “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Neither death nor life nor anything else in all creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:37-39).

The value of prayer goes far beyond the \$4 that a Christian in North Carolina will pay to have a stranger offer a prayer. Prayer changes us and draws us closer to God. Prayer gives us skills to face the challenges of life. And prayer aligns us with the will of God for healing and wholeness.

So let’s offer each other our thoughts and prayers. They are worth far more than a scholarly study can possibly reveal.

Organ Interlude:

“Pleading Savior”

Thomas Anderson

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
Family of 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

Lord God, we give you thanks for all your gifts to us — for daily food, for health, for each breath we take, for freedom to choose, and for the gifts of your word, your power and your love. Our hearts are truly overwhelmed, O God, when we consider how you have entrusted so much to us. May we be worthy of that trust. May we be a people who are unafraid to live as fully and as richly as you want us to live.

Help us, O God, as followers of Jesus, to multiply all that you have given us, to risk spreading your word and perhaps see it misunderstood, to gamble by loving those whom others think worthy only of hate, to take chances by doing good to those who have not done good to us. Help us be faith-filled and desire to increase your glory and your goodness in this world. Make us people who share in both word and deed that which you have given to us.

We pray for the church gathered today, both virtually and around the world, that it may encourage all of its members to discover, develop and use all their gifts, those of nature and those of grace.

We pray for those who are poor in body or in spirit, for those oppressed and heavy laden, for those sick or in despair, especially each person lifted up in our hearts and those on our prayer list. Minister by your Spirit and by us, to all those for whom we have prayed, and help us walk faithfully in the path of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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.”

Closing Hymn:

“When in Our Music God Is Glorified”

Fred Pratt Green

**When in our music God is glorified,
And adoration leaves no room for pride,
It is as though the whole creation cried:
Alleluia!**

**How often, making music, we have found
A new dimension in the world of sound,
As worship moved us to a more profound
Alleluia!**

**So has the Church, in liturgy and song,
In faith and love, through centuries of wrong,
Borne witness to the truth in every tongue:
Alleluia!**

**And did not Jesus sing a Psalm that night
When utmost evil strove against the light?
Then let us sing, for whom he won the fight:
Alleluia!**

Let every instrument be tuned for praise!
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!
And may God give us faith to sing always:
Alleluia!

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Benediction:

The Lord gives us strength.
The Lord blesses us with heavenly peace.
Arise with courage and hope.
Arise with confidence and peace.
Arise and go to serve, love and live. Amen.

Postlude:

Felix Mendelssohn
Allegro Maestoso From Organ Sonata in C Minor Op. 65

Church Humor



Mrs. Jones got a little too used to watching online worship from home.