



FINISHING

THE RACE

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

Fifth Sunday after Easter

May 17, 2020

Prelude:

“Prelude in D Major

J.D.F. Fischer

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters as we await details of what the future holds for the church and for ourselves individually, remember that God is present and offers to us hope. We know that as things continue to improve we must not become over anxious. God continues to be with us and will protect us as we strive to finish the race set before us. May we continue to gather we in spirit as a community encouraging each other to stay the course that God has set for us. We will be okay and God will provide the strength we need to endure. May God continue to raise us up until we shall gather together once again. 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:

Come awake! The light of God is breaking through the darkness.

We bless the light, an unyielding sign of hope in times of trouble.

Do not fear! The love of Christ opens up a space of respite and peace for us.

We bless this place, a sanctuary of rest.

Delight in the gifts of the Spirit, who sets a table of welcome for all.

Surely goodness and mercy have found us here,
in the house of our Lord, the God of abounding love.

Opening Hymn: “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

Charles Wesley

Love divine, all loves excelling,

Joy of heaven to earth come down,

Fix in us thy humble dwelling,

All thy faithful mercies crown;

Jesu, thou art all compassion,

Pure unbounded love thou art,

Visit us with thy salvation,

Enter every trembling heart.

Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit

Into every troubled breast,

Let us all in thee inherit,

Let us find that second rest:
Take away our power¹³ of sinning,
Alpha and Omega be,
End of faith as its beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.

Come, Almighty to deliver,
Let us all thy life receive,
Suddenly return, and never,
Never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve thee as thy hosts above,
Pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
Glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and sinless let us be,
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restor'd in thee;
Chang'd from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise!

A Time of Prayer:

God, who called the heavens and earth into being — show us how to love you today, heart, soul, mind and strength. God who calls us into community — show us how to love our neighbor today.

God who calls each one beloved, and in whose image we are made — show us even how to love our own selves today. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

John 14: 15-21 (NIV)

¹⁵ 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸ 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

Reflective Music Selection:

“What Wondrous Love is This”

Dale Wood

The Message:

“Finishing the Race”

Derek Redmond was determined. He had to finish the race. Period.

He was a young British runner, one who had sky rocketed to fame by shattering his country’s 400-meter record at age 19. But then an Achilles tendon injury forced him to withdraw from the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, and he endured five separate surgeries. When the Summer Olympics arrived in Barcelona in 1992, Derek Redmond was absolutely aching for a medal.

On the day of the 400-meter race, 65,000 fans streamed into the stadium, anxious to witness one of sports’ most thrilling events. High in the stands is Derek’s father, Jim, a faithful witness to every one of his son’s world competitions. According to ESPN, Jim is wearing a T-shirt that reads, “Have you hugged your foot today?”

The race begins and Derek breaks through the pack to seize the lead. “Keep it up, keep it up,” his father Jim says to himself. Heading down the backstretch, only 175 meters from the finish line, Derek is a shoo-in to win this semifinal heat and qualify for the Olympic finals.

But then Derek hears a pop. It’s his right hamstring. He pulls up lame, looking as if he has been shot. His leg quivering, Derek begins to hop on the other leg, and then he slows down and falls to the track. Medical personnel run toward him as he sprawls on the ground, holding his right hamstring.

At the very same moment, there is a stir at the top of the stands. Jim Redmond, seeing his son in trouble, begins to race down from the top row. He is pushing toward the track, sidestepping some people and bumping into others. He has no right or credential or permission to be on the track, but all he can think about is getting to his son, to help him up. He is absolutely single-minded about this, and isn’t going to be stopped by anyone.

On the track, Derek realizes that his dream of an Olympic medal is gone. He is alone. The other runners streak across the finish line, with Steve Lewis of the United States winning the race. He is orphaned, as it were, a lonely figure on the track, friendless, parentless and alone.

Tears pour down Derek’s face, and all he can think is, “I don’t want to take a DNF.” A Did-Not-Finish was not even part of his vocabulary. When the medical crew arrives with a stretcher, Derek tells them, “No, there’s no way I’m getting on that stretcher. I’m going to finish my race.” And so he lifts himself to

his feet, ever so slowly and carefully, and he starts hobbling down the track.

Suddenly, the crowd realizes that Derek isn't dropping out of the race. He isn't limping off the track in defeat, but is actually continuing on one leg, in a fiercely determined effort to make it to the finish line. One painful step at a time, each one a little slower and more agonizing than the one before, Derek limps onward, and the crowd begins to cheer for him. The fans rise to their feet and their cries grow louder and louder, building into a thundering roar.

At that moment, Jim Redmond reaches the bottom of the stands, vaults over the railing, dodges a security guard, and runs out to his son — with two security people running after him. “That’s my son out there,” he yells back at his pursuers, “and I’m going to help him.”

Jim reaches his son at the final curve, about 120 meters from the finish line, and wraps his arm around his waist. “I’m here, son,” Jim says gently, hugging his boy. “We’ll finish together.”

Derek puts his arms around his father’s shoulders and sobs. Together, arm in arm, father and son struggle toward the finish line with 65,000 people cheering, clapping and crying. Just a few steps from the end, with the crowd in an absolute frenzy, Jim releases the grip he has on his son so that Derek can cross the finish line by himself.

“I’m the proudest father alive,” Jim Redmond tells the press afterward, with tears in his eyes. “I’m prouder of him than I would have been if he had won the gold medal. It took a lot of guts for him to do what he did.” Together, they kept a promise they had made to finish the race, no matter what.

We could talk here about God the Father and Son. “I am in the Father and the Father is in me,” said Jesus to his disciples on the night before his crucifixion (John 14:10). They were bound together — bound as tightly as Derek and Jim Redmond — as they approached the finish line at the cross.

But a stronger image emerges. Here are the disciples, who’ve been riding on the back of Jesus for three years. This gravy train, such as it was, was coming to an end. He’s talking about his own death in terms that the disciples don’t clearly understand.

Something is in the wind. But Jesus says to them, as they now begin to feel the tension, that he “will not leave [them] orphaned”(14:18). “I am coming to you,” he says, and his coming is in the form of the Holy Spirit or here called in the Greek, the *Paraclete*, or the Advocate (14:16).

The word evokes a juridical drama, especially since Jesus himself is described as a *paraclete* in 1 John 2:1. Jesus is our advocate, i.e., he stands in court with us, pleading our case.

Here, the Holy Spirit is described as another Advocate. Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit will also stand in for us. The Holy Spirit will strengthen us, keep us on track, because he is the “Spirit of truth” (14:17).

So let’s review.

The disciples are called to get into the *action*, to run this race, as it were. But Jesus is there with them. They never could have done it without him. In their faith run, they’ve never been alone. Jesus has always been there. The very physicality of Jesus has been their source of reassurance. The miracles, the teaching, the leadership. It’s been enough to keep them going.

Now he’s talking of dropping out. The unthinkable’s happening. How are they to proceed? Some are no doubt already contacting their fishing buddies to see if there’s an opening in the cannery at Capernaum.

But Jesus says that even after his death he will still be with them. He will still encourage them, plead with them, pray for them, teach them.

But the *nature* of his presence will change. “In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me,” he says (14:19). He will be present to them in the form of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth.

They will not run this race alone, they will not have to cross the finish line alone.

We all have been in those circumstances where we sign on to do something as long as we have someone to help us with it. If we have to do it alone, forget it.

This is the key issue here. The disciples signed on because Jesus was team leader. We signed on because we believed that God would be present in our lives, that God was trustworthy, that God was Someone we could count on.

Then, things happen that seem to suggest that God is not with us. That Jesus has indeed left us “orphaned” (14:18). And when that happens we’re tempted to take a DNF.

It’s a strong image: orphaned. It’s the feeling that your own parents have rejected and abandoned you. Your parents! Or perhaps the parents are no longer present because of a tragedy. You are orphaned! You do not have even your closest blood relatives alive to support and encourage you.

Jesus told his disciples that he would not leave them “orphaned,” i.e., without a “parent” present in their lives.

In his book, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (1970), sociologist Peter Berger tells of a priest working in the slums of a European city. “Why do you do it,” someone asked. He answered, “So that the rumor of God may not disappear completely.”

Here is the question: *How are we going to react when the rumor of God is fading? When we pull up with a hamstring, and no one is coming out of the stands to help us, to put their arms around us? Are we alone?*

No.

The Holy Spirit is the *Spirit of life*. Because I live, promises Jesus to his followers, “you also will live” (14:19). The good news is that Christ has conquered the power of sin and death, and the same God who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to our bodies through his Spirit that dwells in us (Romans 8:11). No matter what tragedies come our way, whether they are academic or medical or vocational or emotional, we can hold tight to the promise that Jesus gives us the gift of life — life in this world, and life in the world to come.

“What is your only comfort, in life and in death?” asks the first question of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, a Protestant teaching tool that was written way back in 1562. The answer is as true today as it was almost 500 years ago: “That I belong — body and soul, in life and in death — not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”

We belong to Jesus Christ, and his Spirit gives us life. This is good news for any of us who find ourselves limping toward a finish line.

The Holy Spirit *is also the Spirit of love*. “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me,” says Jesus to his disciples; “and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them” (14:21). The love between God and Jesus is never limited to a supernatural Father-Son relationship — it spills over into our lives and saturates us with unconditional acceptance and affection and acknowledgment.

Of course, there are strings attached. Jesus does talk about obedience. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (14:15). That sounds difficult, demanding, and even daunting. The important thing to keep in mind is that the commandments of Jesus all involve living a life of love. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus says to his disciples, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (13:34).

When you are feeling defeated, love one another. When the medical test is

disturbing, love one another. When a family member faces a layoff, love one another. When there's a death in the community, love one another. When a friend has been rejected, love one another. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," says Jesus, "if you have love for one another" (13:35).

The Spirit of truth leads us into a life of love, thus comforting us and carrying us through anything life throws at us.

"I'm here," says Jesus, in every time and place and situation. "We're not taking a DNF. We'll finish together."

Organ Interlude:

"Air"

Gordon Young

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

Martha Quinn

Del Sampson

Elwin Shepard

Ron Smith

Carole Ann Sumner and Henry

Donna Thorne

Marilyn Wales

Patty Westerman and her family

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

Holy God, we continue to marvel at the mystery of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. We are awed by his obedience, astonished by the depth of his love for us and amazed by the display of your power over the forces of sin and death. You are a God of wonders. You restore that which has been lost; bring new life from that which is old; create beauty from sin and ugliness; offer healing and hope where there appears to be only sickness and death. Your miraculous power continues to work in our lives and in our world. Set our hearts aflame and open our eyes that we may recognize your presence in every person, in every situation, in every place. And now we remember each person that is in our thoughts and heart this day, especially those on our prayer list. This we pray as we remember those words which Jesus prayed to you 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:

“Lord of the Dance”

Sydney Carter

I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun,
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth:
At Bethlehem I had my birth.

(Refrain)

Dance, then, wherever you may be,
I am the Lord of the dance, said he,
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,

And I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.
I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee,
But they would not dance and they wouldn't follow me;
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John;
They came with me and the dance went on:

(Refrain)

I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame:
The holy people said it was a shame.
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me on high,
And they left me there on a cross to die:

(Refrain)

I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black;
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back.
They buried my body and they thought I'd gone;
But I am the dance, and I still go on:

(Refrain)

And I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.
They cut me down and I leapt up high;
I am the life that'll never, never die.
I'll live in you if you'll live in me:
I am the Lord of the dance, said he.

(Refrain)

Benediction:

May we continue our journey of faith.
May we share the Good News of our risen Lord.
May we be a beacon of hope and may we be peacemakers.
May we live as an example of reconciling love and may we feed the hungry.
May we care for our families and friends and care for the stranger as well.
Let us go forth now with hope and confidence as servants of the risen Christ.
Amen.

Postlude:

“Prelude and Fugue in F Major”

J.S. Bach