

Rollstone Congregational Church  
Fitchburg, MA

Second Sunday after Pentecost

June 14, 2020

**Prelude:**

**“Offrande”**

**Flor Peeters**

**Gathering Thoughts:**

Dear Brothers and Sisters it is hard to wrap our heads around the reality that we are now more than three months since we have been together as a church family. We are aching to hold and embrace one another after such a long period of time, but while we are not together physically we continue to be in each others thoughts, concerns, and prayer. We still don't know what our limitations and new normal will be, but we will still be faced with the same purpose of leading the lonely, lost, and sick to find wholeness and healing in the Lord. Until that day when we gather together for worship may you continue to care for each others needs as best we are able. Until we are together again, be well and take care of yourselves.

Please send in your prayer requests so that they may be added to the prayer list of Joys and Concerns.

**Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:**

Winds blow, rains fall, storms rage, and we turn to God who is our strength and sanctuary.  
Floods rise, waves batter, wars ravage, and we turn to God who is our strength and sanctuary.  
Violence threatens, hunger abounds, diseases flourish, and we turn to God who is our strength and sanctuary.  
We are safely surrounded by His Spirit, for God's sustaining and nourishing Spirit surrounds and affirms us.

**Opening Hymn:**

**“Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness”**

James K. Manley

*(Refrain)*

Spirit, spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free.  
Spirit, spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness, wind, wind on the sea.

1.  
You moved on the waters, you called to the deep,  
then you coaxed up the mountains from the valleys of sleep;  
And over the eons you called to each thing,  
“Awake from your slumbers and rise on your wings.”

*(Refrain)*

Spirit, spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free.  
Spirit, spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness, wind, wind on the sea.

2.

You swept through the desert and stung with the sand;  
and You goaded Your people with a law and a land.  
When they were confounded with idols and lies,  
then You spoke through Your prophets to open their eyes.

*(Refrain)*

Spirit, spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free.  
Spirit, spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness, wind, wind on the sea.

3.

You sang in a stable, you cried from a hill,  
then you whispered in silence when the whole world was still;  
And down in the city you called once again,  
when you blew through your people on the rush of the wind.

*(Refrain)*

Spirit, spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free.  
Spirit, spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness, wind, wind on the sea.

4.

You call from tomorrow, you break ancient schemes,  
from the bondage of sorrow the captives dream dreams;  
Our women see visions, our men clear their eyes.  
With bold new decisions your people arise.

*(Refrain)*

Spirit, spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free.  
Spirit, spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness, wind, wind on the sea.

## **A Time of Prayer:**

Amazing God of the universe, you have called us from different walks of life. From our diverse backgrounds, you have weaved us into a family of faith and discipleship. We pray that even as you have accepted us as we are, we can learn even more how to accept and love others whose ways are different from our own.

As we open our hearts to you, show us the way to open our hearts to others. We pray, O God, that you would even challenge us to love all humankind — those we do not like and especially our “enemies.” In your presence of wherever we are, O God, may we worship together without exclusion and rejoice together always. Amen.

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

**Romans 5:1-8 (NIV)**

5 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

## **Musical Interlude**

**“Open my Eyes”**

**Jesse Manibusan**

## **The Message:**

**“Nobody Has Clean Hands”**

When Rachel Held Evans, a wife and mother of two small children, died on May 4, 2019, at the age of 37, it was not just her family, friends and acquaintances who were saddened. Thousands of people across the nation who’d never met her face to face also felt a deep sense of loss. The bond was forged because of what Evans had written about the Christian faith in her popular blog and books.

Such was the power of her words about moving from the evangelical faith of her youth to a progressive stance on Christianity that a writer for *The Christian Century* called her “the most influential mainline theologian of her generation, the C.S. Lewis of her time.” While Evans herself was neither trained nor credentialed in religious studies, and was not ordained and never pastored a church, she influenced many people who entered the ministry, especially women.

Although she was raised in a conservative Christian home and environment and as a teen embraced that expression of Christianity, she eventually found herself pushing back against traditional evangelical positions. She challenged gender roles in the church and advocated for LGBTQ inclusion. “At times, she was a friendly dialogue partner,” said journalist Kate Shellnutt, writing in *Vox*. And

other times, Evans was “a watchdog against the tradition she grew up in — earning the title ‘the most polarizing woman in evangelicalism’ per The Washington Post, and being described as ‘saying the things pastors can’t’ in the Christian magazine Sojourners.” The Atlantic dubbed her a “hero to Christian misfits.”

Evans had a broad appeal, even among her critics. While she lay in a coma before her death, her well-wishers ranged from conservative evangelical leaders who openly disagreed with her as well as people so theologically liberal that they disagreed with the very idea of prayer.

Katelyn Beaty, editor at large for Christianity Today, commented that Evans “wrote unflinchingly about how hard it is to trust God, to forgive church leaders, to wrestle with Scripture. There was a quiet sadness to her writing, a grief over having lost a simpler faith and faith community.”

“RHE [as Evans was known online] taught the beauty of a messy and complicated faith,” wrote an Evans follower, Cristina Rosetti, on Twitter. “She showed us how to hold multiple perspectives in tension. She made people feel safe to talk about doubt.”

Here’s where this summary about Evans meets the epistle reading for today: Although Evans eventually moved away from her evangelical faith to a progressive position, she never left the church, instead moving to a congregation of a mainline denomination. In her book, *Searching for Sunday*, she says that she remained a Christian despite all her doubts and objections to traditional theology “because Christianity names and addresses sin. It acknowledges the reality that the evil we observe in the world is present in ourselves. It tells the truth about the human condition — that we are not okay.”

Which, of course, is what Paul says in different words in Romans 5: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ... But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (vv. 6, 8, emphasis added).

We are not okay.

Of course, Paul was not the first to say this. Centuries earlier, the prophet we sometime refer to as “second Isaiah” or “Isaiah of Babylon” wrote about a Suffering Servant and declared, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way,” and as a result, the Lord has laid on that servant “the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). And many generations before Isaiah, the Lord told the Israelites to put fringes on their garments so they would remember “all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes” (Numbers 15:39).

Ah yes, the lust of our own hearts.

We are not okay.

But we don’t need to go way back into Scripture to know this. Many of us are aware that we individually and collectively have piles of moral garbage that we don’t want to others to see.

In *Searching for Sunday*, Evans spoke of the stark language in prayers of confession, which acknowledge plainly our sinfulness, and likened them to the kind of introductions that are typical at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings: “My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I’m an alcoholic.” In the way that those introductions equalize attendees at those meetings, Evans said, prayers of confession equalize worshipers in church.

These prayers, said Evans, “remind us that we all move through the world in the same state — broken and beloved — and that we’re all in need of healing and grace. They embolden us to confess to one another not only our sins, but also our fears, our doubts, our questions, our injuries and our pain.

They give us permission to start telling one another the truth, and to believe that this strange way of living is the only way to set one another free.”

But, Evans noted, our churches sometimes feel more like country clubs than AA meetings, especially when we mumble through rote confessions and merely exchange pleasantries with fellow worshipers “while mingling beneath a cross upon which hangs a beaten, nearly naked man, suffering publicly on our behalf.”

She said she suspects this habit stems from the same impulse that told her she should drop a few pounds before joining the Y (so as not to embarrass herself in front of fit people), “the same impulse,” Evans said, “that kept my mother from hiring a housekeeper because she felt compelled to clean the bathroom before the Merry Maids arrived (so as not to expose to the world the abomination that is a hair-clogged shower drain).”

“The truth is, we think church is for people living in the ‘after’ picture,” said Evans. “We think church is for the healthy, even though Jesus told us time and again he came to minister to the sick. We think church is for good people, not resurrected people.”

Stan Purdum writes about an experience he had at a country church he pastored years ago. He decided one Saturday in October to harvest the black walnuts that were falling to the ground, encased in tough green husks as large as baseballs, from a large tree behind the parsonage. He headed outside with two bushel-baskets, which he soon filled with the rough-husked nuts. Purdum knew the nuts themselves were deep inside these tough outer skins, and that they couldn’t begin to dry until the husks had been removed. While he supposed the husks would eventually split open of their own accord, he saw no reason not to speed the process along with a knife.

He attacked the first husk. It was tougher than he expected, but eventually the sharp knife sliced into the skin and penetrated until it hit the nutshell. He then turned the husk over and hacked a similar cut into the other side, with the clear juice from the meat of the husk running onto his hands. He had hoped the outer skin could now be peeled off, but it resisted his tugging and twisting.

But finally, after five minutes of high-energy labor and some prying with a screwdriver, he shucked the outer layer off and revealed the nut inside. It still had strings of the outer flesh clinging to its surface. It took another half-hour to free the second nut, and at that point, he gave up.

When he washed up, however, he found that the husk juice had left dark stains on his hands that would not come off, not even with undiluted bleach.

That’s when Purdum remembered that he was to serve communion the next day, stained hands notwithstanding. So in church the next morning, before starting the communion ritual, he told the congregation of the walnut adventure, and that despite appearances, his hands were clean. The whole congregation had a good chuckle at his expense, and nobody seemed to mind being served communion by stained-hand pastor.

After the service, one of the older farmers said, “You know, there is a way to get the nuts if you still want them. Just dump ’em in your gravel driveway and leave ’em there for a few days, running over them with your car as you come and go. This will remove or loosen most of the husks. The rest will be loose enough to pry out manually — but wear gloves,” he added.

Purdum narrates a slightly fictionalized version of this walnut-harvesting incident in his book, *New Mercies I See*, but says that it was only later that he realized he had missed a good opportunity for a solid theological statement: “Nobody comes to the Lord’s supper with clean hands.”

Fortunately, God doesn't require that our hands be clean before welcoming us. The gospel message tells us that God sent his Son not to condemn us, but to save us (John 3:16-17). And although Psalm 24 says that only those with clean hands and pure hearts can stand before the Lord (v. 4), the point is that God cleans our hands and purifies our hearts so that we can stand before him.

Whether we actually say these words or not, we come before God, as Evans indicated, with the AA-type statement: "My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'm a sinner."

And God responds with, "Your name is \_\_\_\_\_, and you are redeemed."

That's what Paul tells us in our text: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." He's the servant upon whom, Isaiah said, "the iniquity of us all" — our moral garbage — is laid, and he carries it away. And Paul concludes: "But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (5:11).

Rachel Held Evans, despite her persistent doubts and knee-jerk cynicism, found the right reason to stay with the church — "because Christianity names and addresses sin" — and directs us to the Lord, who cleanses and redeems us.

And for sure, we need that!

**Musical Interlude:**

**"Quatre Choral No. 1"**

**A. Metzner**

**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](mailto: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  
Bob and Pat Goguen  
Linda Hurd  
Tom Kazanjian  
Sarah Kee  
Bob and Doris Lane  
Diane Lane Cormier  
Linda Long  
Lorraine Michaud  
Cathie Perra  
Family of Randy Phelps  
Maria Piazza  
Melanie Pouliot

**Jackie Reiss  
Martha Quinn  
Del Sampson  
Elwin Shepard  
Ron Smith  
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry  
Donna Thorne  
Marilyn Wales  
Mary Wayman  
Family of 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**

The Bible tells us to “approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”. We are also instructed not to “worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”. Let us, then, come before God in prayer.

As we enter into this time of prayer, O God, we ask that you would help us to let go of what is past. Release us from anger and resentments and hurts of days gone by; free us from bitterness and help us to fill this space with the love of Christ.

We offer our gratitude for the gift of love.

We offer our thanks for those people in our lives who love us unconditionally.

We offer our thanks for those who provide a safe place in the shelter of their unselfish love.

We offer our praise for those who give, expecting nothing in return for the gift.

We offer our gratitude to those who cause us to rise to our greater selves.

We offer thanks for those who help us to put the pieces of our lives back together when dreams and hopes are shattered.

We remember now those in need of your comforting presence: (offer specific intercessions).

Gracious God, we praise you for hearing the inmost desires of our hearts. We cast away our fears and anxieties. We lay it all before you. While we honor the past, we also look forward to the future with hope and love.

All of this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who, while he was with us, taught us to pray, 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:**

**“Thank Our God for Sisters, Brothers”**

Roger Powell

Thank our God for sisters, brothers, one by grace, in harmony,  
Joining heart to heart with others, making strong community.  
With the cross of Christ our standard, let us sing as with one voice,  
Glory, glory, yours the promise: we who are the church rejoice.

Praise to God for congregations, keeping faith with Christ as guide;  
Many tongues of many nations, song and service unified.  
Sweet the psalm and sweet the carol, when our song is raised as one.  
Glory, glory, yours the glory, as in heaven your will be done.

Holy is your name forever! Heal divisions that remain;  
Bless the church's new endeavors; make our witness one again.  
One in Christ and in Christ's gospel, make us one we now implore.  
Glory, glory, yours the glory, then and now and evermore.

**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. Amen.

**Postlude:**

**“Break Forth, Ye Heavens”**

**Edward Broughton**