



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

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

August 2, 2020

Prelude: O Breathe on Me, O Breath of God

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, we ask for your prayers and support as we begin to prepare for our returning together in this place. We will be experiencing a new normal that we might find difficult and awkward as we adapt to these changes. Things will be certainly different and will continue to be utilized for the love, care, and compassion of each other. You should have received a packet with the initial details outlining what we will and cannot do when we return. In preparation for this happening, we will be scheduling a church wide zoom meeting to have a question and answer opportunity on August 5th at 7:00 P.M. We continue to pray and hope that all are well as look forward to seeing each of you real soon.

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

Are any among us weary? Do we carry heavy burdens?
Are any among us frantic and scattered, breathless in our busy-ness?
Are any among us feeling brittle and broken, thirsty for the gospel?
Are any among us feeling hollow and empty, hungry for truth?
We ask many questions with answers that can be found here all because;
Here is a place of rest. Here we encounter Christ's healing and grace.
Here is a place of deep peace. In our worship, we meet the unhurried God.
Here we encounter Jesus, the living water — tranquil and ever-present.
Here we encounter Christ, the bread of life — nourishment for the journey.

Opening Hymn:

"This Is a Day of New Beginnings"

Brian Wren/Carlton Young

This is a day of new beginnings, time to remember, and move on,
time to believe what love is bringing, laying to rest the pain that's gone.

For by the life and death of Jesus, love's mighty Spirit, now as then,
can make for us a world of difference as faith and hope are born again.

Then let us, with the Spirit's daring, step from the past, and leave behind
our disappointment, guilt and grieving, seeking new paths, and sure to find.

In faith we'll gather round the table to show and share what love can do.
This is a day of new beginnings; our God is making all things new.

A Time of Prayer:

Great Healer, make us aware of your great Spirit here in this place. Touch and heal our brokenness, and lift us out of despair and doubt. Dry our tears of pain and sorrow. Comfort and nourish us with the many blessings of your great love, O God. May we flourish and blossom in the warmth and compassion of your healing love and grace. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Matthew 14:13-21 (NIV)

13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’ 16 Jesus said to them, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’ 17 They replied, ‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.’ 18 And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’ 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Musical Interlude:

Bread for the World

Bernadette Farrell

The Message:

“Are Miracles Real?”

Did you see the startling headline that read: “Arkansas woman texted father’s number every day after he died; she got a response four years later”?

That made the story below the headline sound like an outreach from the other side of the grave. But the actual story was far less sensational.

For four years, Chastity Patterson, then 23, of Newport, Arkansas, had been mourning the death of Jason Lignons, who, while not her biological father, had been so much like a father to her that she called him Dad.

After he died, Chastity continued to text his phone every day to update him about her life. While she didn’t expect a response, the daily texting was a way of dealing with her grief. In her message on October 25, the night before the fourth anniversary of Lignons’ death, she told about how she’d beaten cancer and hadn’t gotten sick since his passing. She also wrote about falling in love and having her heart broken, joking that Lignons “would have killed”

the guy.

But then, she received a response.

It was not Ligons, but a man, identified only as Brad, who had been receiving her daily messages these past four years.

“I am not your father,” Brad texted, “but I have been getting all your messages for the past four years. ... I lost my daughter in a car wreck in August 2014 and your messages have kept me alive,” Brad said. “When you text me, I know it’s a message from God.”

Brad went on to say that he had read her messages for all that time but hadn’t texted her back for fear of breaking her heart.

Chastity posted the exchange to Facebook, saying, “Today was my sign that everything is okay and I can let him rest!” Her post was then shared more than 288,000 times and picked up by several media outlets.

How Brad came to receive Chastity’s messages is easily explained: When an individual surrenders a phone number, whether because of relocation, death or other reason, the company that supplied the phone service eventually reissues it to a new customer, sometimes as soon as 30 days after the number was discontinued.

After Chastity’s story went viral, she posted that she had shared the story to show friends and family “that there is a God and it might take four years, but he shows up right on time!”

While Chastity’s story was splashed out by several media outlets, few of the major national news organizations reported the story at all, which suggests that by some standards, it didn’t rise to the level of “news,” and there was no “miracle” involved.

And that brings us to the Scripture lesson for today — the well-known account of Jesus feeding more than 5,000 people with only five loaves of bread and two fish and ending up with 12 baskets of leftovers. This story appears in all four gospels, a sure sign that the early Christians had no doubt that what Jesus did that day was a miracle.

But now fast forward to the 19th century, when a Protestant Bible scholar named Heinrich Paulus examined the feeding the 5,000 story. Paulus was a rationalist, and as such, was skeptical that miracles occurred. He posited that what really happened was that in the spirit of the day, after Jesus blessed the meager amount of food on hand, the wealthier people in the crowd, who had arrived with packed picnic baskets, shared their food with those who had none.

People persuaded by Paulus say the real miracle was that the wealthy were inspired to share what they had.

Paulus, by the way, is the same guy who proposed the “swoon theory,” which speculates that Jesus did not actually die on the cross, but somehow survived his execution and proclaimed that he had risen from the dead.

Of course, many of us have trouble reconciling miracles with reason. And that logic gap is likely what the news writer was counting on when he

headlined Chastity's story to sound spectacular.

But both the sensational headline and our natural skepticism miss the real story: that Chastity's texts helped Brad deal with his grief following his daughter's death, and that his reply to Chastity helped her put to rest her grief over Ligons' death, and that both Chastity and Brad viewed the texts from the other as conveying a message from God.

Miracle stories like the feeding of the 5,000 and non-miracle stories like Chastity's invite us to think about how God does work in our lives. Certainly God is not limited to interventions that cannot be explained by science or that go beyond the realm of reason. He can work through means we might label as coincidence or accident or serendipity or luck or natural processes or everyday happenings.

In Isaiah, we find God saying, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, ... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8-9). We preachers often quote these words to emphasize how God can work through means that we humans don't have available to us, and that is certainly a correct message to hear in these verses. But we shouldn't take them as if they are saying that God works only through extraordinary or miraculous means. God's higher ways may, in some cases, operate through everyday things — through natural functions of life. Some Christians have observed that God uses means (or agents, tools or intermediaries) much more often than he intervenes in the laws of nature — with bright lights and all, such as he did with Paul on the road to Damascus.

This does not denigrate the majesty of God's ways. In fact, it might be said that in sending Jesus as a human being, God was putting his majesty in an ordinary "container."

Consider this true story from a book called *Small Miracles*: Carol Anderson was young widow whose husband died at 35. Bob Edwards was a young widower whose wife had been killed in a car accident at 29. Both had happy marriages, but after several lonely years the two surviving spouses met and got married. They got along well except for one thing — their differing opinions about how to handle their history. Bob wanted to explore it, to share it with Carol. He wanted to know about Carol's first husband and tell her about his first wife. Carol, however, didn't want to talk at all about their previous marriages; the pain from her loss was still too strong. "Why raise ghosts?" she said. But Bob felt that good memories should be preserved, not obliterated.

This issue hung between them for a long time, with Carol's view prevailing, to Bob's disappointment. But finally, after a few years, Carol felt secure enough to talk about the past and decided to show Bob some snapshots from her first marriage. Among the photos were pictures that Carol and her first husband had taken in France on their honeymoon. "Here we are at Lourdes," Carol said, pointing to a photo taken at the famous healing shrine.

“You went to Lourdes?” Bob said, mildly interested. “So did we.”

“Well, I guess half the world goes to Lourdes,” Carol said. It was no big deal.

But then Bob asked to see the photo again. “Who’s that couple in the background?”

“I have no idea,” Carol said. “Just a couple who walked by and were caught by the shutter. I can see why you asked, though ... It does look as though they’re standing behind us, almost as if they’re posing, but that’s just an illusion.”

“That couple,” Bob said, “is me and my first wife.”

The matter for us to affirm today is raised both by the miracle story in the Scripture reading and by some natural occurrences that take on special meanings for us — in that we see the hand of God behind them. From the perspective of daily life, there’s not much value in arguing over whether miracles occur or whether there are rational explanations for the events that bring us meaning, healing, hope or lift us up. If we experience God as being in them, we are in touch with the miraculous.

Let’s say it like this: We encounter many serendipitous happenings in life for which there is no supernatural intervention overriding the laws of nature. But something occurs that is not ordinary, not usual and not what one would normally expect to happen. Perhaps God did not provide an exception to Newton’s (or Einstein’s) laws of motion, but he may well have moved people to interact in ways that provided what was needed by someone in a particular situation.

In the case of Chastity and Brad, the miracle may have been that God moved both of them toward the mutual support and benefit that occurred.

And we can say this as well: Both Chastity and Brad were quick to see God’s fingerprints in their exchange. Skeptics might disagree, but some things take the eyes of faith to discern.

If you look, you may find God’s fingerprints all over the place.

Musical Interlude:

Adagio from Organ Symphony in F Minor

Peterson

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
Diana Escarbie
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
Linda Hurd
Mary Jackson
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Jean LeClaire
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
Family of Cathie Perra
Maria Piazza
Chris Pollice
Melanie Pouliot
Jackie Reiss
Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne
Daniel Tousignant
Marilyn Wales
Mary Wayman

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

Our Church and all of its members and friends

All members of our armed forced who have committed themselves
to the protection of liberty

Holy God, it seems to be our natural human inclination to resist the truth that suffering is part of life. We go to great lengths to avoid it for ourselves and to spare those we love from any pain, struggle or discomfort. Merciful Savior, grant us the wisdom to embrace suffering as a gift, to receive the lessons that pain alone can teach us with thankfulness, to submit to the growth and maturity that difficulty can bring in our lives. We ask for courage to follow in Jesus' footsteps, as he greeted his own suffering with dignity, humility and grace. Amen.... "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."

Sharing in the Bread and the Cup

As we now prepare ourselves to gather about the table of the Lord to break bread and to drink of the cup let us gather together in offering to God our Prayer of Confession.

Prayer of Confession

We have failed as your church, O God. You call us to live faithfully, act justly and bring peace to the earth. Instead, our lives and your church reflect more of our needs and worries and less of the needs and worries of all peoples. Move us beyond ourselves to hear the cry of the world and to respond with acts and deeds of kindness, mercy and justice. May your grace shine through a church that, even with its shortcomings, accepts the call of Christ to serve and care and love and bring peace. May we feel your forgiving spirit now. Amen.

Words of Assurance

In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. In our forgiveness, may we blossom fully with purpose and resolve, so that the world will know us by our love.

The Act of Breaking Bread and Sharing in the Cup

We remember that Christ, when gathered with his followers, took a loaf of bread that he blessed and broke. He then gave it to them and told them to eat of the bread and to remember him.

When they had finished the meal we remember that Christ took a cup of wine which he blessed and then gave it to them saying that this was the cup of the new covenant being poured out and that each time they drank of the cup that they should remember him.

Let us now share in the eating of the bread and drinking from the cup.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Heavenly Father, you gave your Son to die and raised him to give us eternal life. Grant that we who have received his body and blood may live in him and serve you as your children.

We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Closing Hymn:

“The Church of Christ, in Every Age”

**Fred Pratt Green
hymntune — Wareham**

The Church of Christ in every age
Beset by change but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.

Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat,
And never live until they die.

Then let the servant Church arise,
A caring Church that longs to be
A partner in Christ’s sacrifice,
And clothed in Christ’s humanity.

For he alone, whose blood was shed,
Can cure the fever in our blood,
And teach us how to share our bread
And feed the starving multitude.

Benediction:

As Christ forgives us, so let us forgive others. As Christ loves us, so let us love others. Therefore to the love, grace and peace of God we commend you and all those you love, wherever they may be. Amen.

Postlude:

All Creatures of Our God and King