



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

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2020

Prelude:

Choral

Leon Boellmann

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, we are rapidly approaching the time when we shall be gathering together in the sanctuary to worship and praise God. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact either Paul Stansel, Andy Lipasti, Linda Haas, Amy Larsen, or Pastor Dave and we will try to provide an answer. While we have established our target date for return please be aware that it could still change based on the situation in the city, commonwealth, and nation. Looking forward to seeing and being with each of you soon.

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

Let us come together in the spirit of the One who unites us all;
In the spirit of our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Let us remember that we are God's chosen people;
Chosen to be God's servants in the world.
We gather because of our common need for renewal.
Let us offer acceptable worship to God who renews us for service.

Opening Hymn: Come, Thou Fount

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet sung by flaming tongues above;
Praise the mount, I'm fixed upon it, mount of Thy redeeming love.

Here I raise my Ebenezer, here there by Thy great help I've come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger, interposed His precious blood.

Oh, that day when freed from sinning, I shall see Thy lovely face;
Clothed then in the blood washed linen, how I'll sing Thy wondrous grace.
Come, my Lord, no longer tarry, take my ransomed soul away;
Send Thine angels now to carry, me to realms of endless day.

A Time of Prayer:

Merciful God, we come before you with praise and thanksgiving!
Through Jesus Christ, you have lavished on us every spiritual blessing we could possibly imagine!
Before the world was created, you already knew us and loved us.
You adopted us as your own children and redeemed us through the blood of Christ.
Even more, you have made us your heirs, and given us your own Spirit as a sign and guarantee.
How we praise you! Open our hearts and minds to your presence among us here.
May our worship this morning bring you honor and glory,
for you alone are worthy of our praise. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Romans 12:1-8 (NIV)

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Musical Interlude:

All Through the Night

The Message:

“Practicing for Success”

In January 2019, Russian pianist Elisey Myslin strode onto the stage of the concert hall in Naberezhnye Chelny, an industrial city of more than a half million people on the Kama River, about 600 miles due east of Moscow. He smiled confidently at the audience. The hall was packed. He was dressed in a concert-style black tuxedo, which contrasted nicely with a mane of flowing blond hair. He sat on the piano bench, and then took a few moments to adjust it for height and distance to the keyboard, rested his hands on the keyboard

and nodded to the conductor.

The orchestra began to play and soon Mysin was coaxing magic out of the grand piano, playing the challenging “Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Major” by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who composed the three-movement concerto when he was only 11 years old. Mysin played without music, typical of professional, classical pianists, and played, according to one critic, in a way that showcased “his incredible sense of style and interpretation.”

At the end of his performance, Mysin received a huge standing ovation, two bouquets of flowers and demands of an encore. So he played another piece, and again received the adoration of the music-lovers who had crowded into the venue to see and hear the virtuoso, and then he walked off the stage, and into the arms of his mother, who took him home, where she read him a bedtime story and tucked him in.

Mysin, at the time, was 8 years old.

Now consider Anna Ji-Eun Lee, who had her debut as a violinist when she performed Paganini’s “Violin Concerto No. 1” with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Lan Shui, conducting.

She was 6 years old.

These are just two of many stories of child prodigies whose expertise and virtuosity astounds and amazes.

But why bring this up?

The stories of Lee and Mysin have a bearing on our understanding — or misunderstanding — of the so-called “10,000-hour rule” that Malcolm Gladwell popularized several years ago in his bestselling book, *Outliers*.

Gladwell suggested that expertise, world-class success and virtuosity can be achieved simply by practicing a certain specific task for 10,000 hours. If you spent 20 hours a week doing this, you could reach success after about 10 years.

But wait! How about little Anna Ji-Eun Lee? When Anna played Paganini, she was just 52,560 hours old.

Subtract 21,900 for sleep, 5,000 for playing with Beanie Babies, 2,000 listening to mum read a bedtime story, 2,000 for getting a bath, 2,000 for watching Sesame Street and cartoons, 200 for going to Sunday school with parents, and — most importantly — learning how to use a spoon, how to talk and how to use the potty, 15,000 ... Well, at this point she’s at 48,100 hours.

She only has 4,460 hours left to practice the violin.

She doesn’t have 10,000 hours available to become a world-class violinist. Yet she is ... a world-class violinist at the age of 6.

Gladwell explains that the 10,000-hour rule doesn’t apply to sports or concert pianists and violinists, and he confesses that, “I could play chess for 100 years and I’ll never be a grandmaster. The point is simply that natural ability requires a huge investment of time in order to be made manifest.”

But, still, he was on to something, wasn’t he?

Let’s find out.

To do this, we go to Romans 12, which is the epistle reading for today,

looking particularly at verses 1 and 2: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect”.

The first thing we notice in this verse is the apostle Paul’s call for a sacrifice. This evokes in the minds of his readers what was then a well-known image: the shedding of blood on an altar particularly set aside for sacrificial purposes. The blood of a lamb, calf or bullock was shed for the propitiation of sins. This practice was routine in the lives of the Hebrews for millennia. The ritual details are still available to us in the books of the Torah, or what we called the Books of Moses, the Pentateuch or the first five books of the Old Testament.

Getting our sins atoned was a bloody mess, and it invariably involved a death.

So Paul’s readers understood that the point he was making was that followers of Jesus (who was regarded as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”) need to be all in.

But Paul doesn’t just say our lives should be a sacrifice.

He doesn’t argue that we should bleed out on the altar of Christian service.

Instead, he suggests in a quite oxymoronic way that we present our bodies as living sacrifices, that is, sacrifices that do not die! Living deaths!

Child prodigies are examples of this. They are all in, and their lives are given entirely to their music or their sport (like golf or tennis). They do not surrender their lives; they offer their lives. They give up almost everything else. They live for it. It is their life.

And so it is for us today. We’re called to be all in. To die — by being alive to what these verses call our “spiritual worship.”

But now, we turn to specific aspects of this “living sacrifice.” One thing that snags our attention is his reference to the “renewing of your minds.” This intrigues us because mindfulness and one’s mindset are very trendy topics right now in popular culture and among the mavens of self-help psychology.

Stanford professor Carol Dweck argues that there are two types of mindsets: The growth and the fixed. The “growth mindset” thrives on challenge and “sees failure not as evidence of unintelligence but as a heartening springboard for growth and for stretching our existing abilities.”

A “fixed mindset” assumes that “our character, intelligence, and creative ability are static givens which we can’t change in any meaningful way, and success is the affirmation of that inherent intelligence.”

The apostle Paul suggests a third mindset: the transformative mindset. This is an attitude that has a passion for improvement, radical metamorphosis, an unwillingness to accept old habits and conventional thinking. Paul’s transformative mindset is a turbo-charged version of Dweck’s growth mindset. It understands that the purpose of growth is transformation.

For Paul, it's all about mindset. A Christian is something with an extraordinary, unusual, unconventional and non-conformist way of looking at things. For followers of Jesus, transformation is where it's at, what it's all about. The "it" in that sentence is life — the abundant life, the life to which Jesus has called us.

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle — whose life would ultimately bleed out in Rome as an actual sacrifice, not just a metaphorical one — suggests that we have the same "mind" that was in Christ Jesus.

For Paul, success was not at all what Professor Dweck suggests in *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, a book with many insights and valuable suggestions. Paul's view of success was radical transformation that included self-denial, humility, serving others and seeking the success of others.

The transformative mindset can turn the world upside down. Bring together a group of people with this mindset and who knows what can happen?

And what is such a group called? The church!

Malcolm Gladwell concedes that natural ability is a factor in world-class success. He admits he will never be a grandmaster.

So are some people "natural Christians," and others not so natural?

Why is it easier for some Christians to be nice, humble, caring, loving and kind than for others?

Tough question. But if it helps, we might remember to scratch out the idea that we can ever be successful at living godly lives — unless we can get ourselves a new nature!

And this is precisely what the apostle Paul has already discussed with his Roman audience. See chapters 5-8.

Not only do we have a new nature in Christ Jesus, we have been given special aptitudes, gifts or charisms, that will bless the body of Christ in general and people in our own sphere of influence in particular. Paul discusses this in the epistle reading for today.

Let's look closer.

Gladwell argues that what distinguishes many virtuosos and prodigies is not only their natural talent, but their ability to practice in the right way. Pianists know when they need to practice left hand octave arpeggios; tennis players know when and how to work on their baseline topspin backhand strokes.

Practice for prodigies is not haphazard.

That's the point of Paul's comments about the gifts of the Spirit. "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness" (vv. 6-8).

We have "natural" ability, that is, we have the mind and nature of Christ. But we should be careful about how we practice.

If we're teaching, we should focus on teaching, not on leadership and administration; if we are kindhearted and compassionate, we should pursue our altruistic instincts with a passion, and not complain about our ineptitude as teachers. And so on.

Some psychologists and educators call this “staying in our lane.”

Perhaps practicing our passions, focusing on the right kind of practice or committing ourselves to this kind of service will be difficult.

It might mean sacrifice. Some sweat and blood may be involved.

But then, we realize something else that's truly amazing.

The astonishing truth hits us: This is our “spiritual worship”! (v. 1)

The sacrifice, the blood, sweat and tears, the self-denial, the transformative mindset, the relentless practicing in the right way — it's our worship. It is a sweet incense that floats pleasantly into the very presence of God.

We don't know what will become of Elisey Mysin. He's only 10 years old or so. He's still playing the piano in the heart of Russia.

But at age 6, Anna Ji-Eun Lee was accepted as a student at the Pre-College of the Juilliard School to study under Masao Kawasaki. She graduated from the Juilliard School in 2013, and went on to study at Harvard. She's been working with Ana Chumachenco as a Young Soloist at Kronberg Academy. She has performed in the most highly acclaimed venues in the United States, including several performances at Carnegie Hall. She has played Wigmore Hall in London and performed with several renowned orchestras, including the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

She knows all about sacrificing for success. About transformation. Mindset. Practicing in the right way.

We know what has become of her.

But what will become of us?

How will we bless the world? How will our “audience” thrill at the virtuosity of our transformative ministry? How will we serve Jesus in our church, our community, among our friends, among neighbors, co-workers, the lost and needy, the lowly and downcast?

For the apostle Paul, bringing his letter to the church at Rome to a close, these are the important questions. He knew then that the world needs Jesus people who are all in, who will sacrifice for success — the kind of success that reconciles and connects people to God.

Musical Interlude: Go in Peace, with the Message of God Unknown

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 LeClair
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
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 forces who have committed themselves
to the protection of liberty

*Congratulations to Cristen Carpentier — on completing her studies
to become a Registered Nurse.*

O God, we offer our thanks for the abundant life that is ours. We thank you for our church and for our church family. We thank you for those who gather here, and for those who are unable to be with us for this time of worship. We offer our gratitude for all the choices that are ours. We thank you that we can choose where we live, what we eat and where we worship. So forgive us, gracious God, for the times when we have complained about these things. Keep us mindful of those who have no house to call their own and for those who do not know where their next meal is coming from. Help us to revel in our many alternatives rather than complain about many decisions. Open our eyes and open our hearts to those who are struggling with the business of going on. Help those who find themselves in a muddle without hope to hang on to the promise that morning comes, and that, someday, the morning will bring joy. Grant us the patience to sit with others in their quandaries and pain. Help us to understand those who are not in a place to embrace life with joy. We offer our prayers in the name of Jesus, who always hears our cries for help. And now let us pray together as Jesus taught us to 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: “Take My Life, and Let It Be”

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise.
Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing always, only, for my King.
Take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from Thee.
Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect, and use every power as Thou shalt choose,

Take my will, and make it thine; it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is thine own; it shall be thy royal throne.
Take my love, my Lord, I pour at thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for thee.

Benediction:

Now, let us go out from this place and witness to the next generation of believers through our humility before God, our trust in God, our disciplined life because of God, our attentiveness to God, and our steadfast faithfulness in God’s eternal grace and presence. Amen.

Postlude:

Fanfare

William Mathias