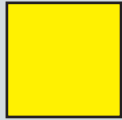


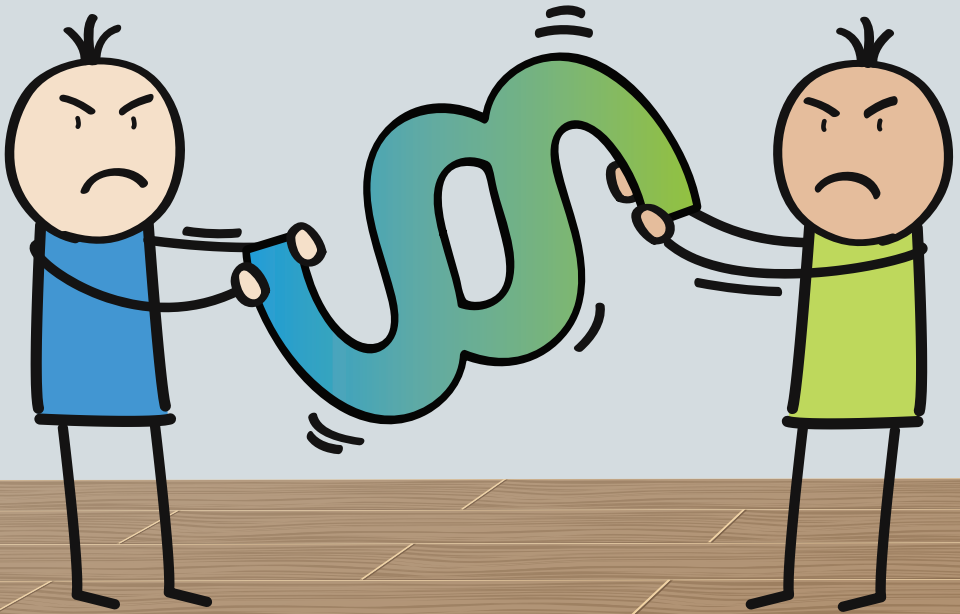
Give



Take



Compromise



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

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 13, 2020

Prelude:

Prelude on Amazing Grace

George Maxwell

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, we wish that we could with certainty tell you a date as to when we will be worshipping in the church building, but we are moving cautiously as we observe what will happen as the schools begin to open up their buildings. We have decided that we will proceed slowly and that the services will be more like the ones you have been able to see virtually or have received via mail. Please continue to pray for the leadership team that is meeting frequently via computer conferences to ensure that our regathering will be safe and fulfilling. May God continue to surround you with His love and mercy as we live in these unusual times.

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

Let us examine ourselves to see if we rest in faith.

We do not boast of our week's conquests, but we boast rather of the things that reveal our weakness.

Do you not know the stirrings of divine power laid beneath the hardships of everyday life?

Cultivated by humility to be released as a fragrance of new life is the power of the living Christ.

Opening Hymn:

“In Christ There Is No East or West”

In Christ there is no East or West,
In Him no South or North;
But one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth.

In Him shall true hearts everywhere
Their high communion find;
His service is the golden cord,
Close binding humankind.

Join hands, then, members of the faith,
Whatever your race may be!
Who serves my Father as His child
Is surely kin to me.

In Christ now meet both East and West,
In Him meet North and South;
All Christly souls are one in Him
Throughout the whole wide earth.

A Time of Prayer:

How often we call out to you, O Lord, yet we do not incline an ear to the words spoken in the still quiet of our souls. We distance ourselves from your love and healing touch. Break the stubborn arrogance of our hearts, that we would embrace your unchanging word and know true peace that only comes from total submission to your will. For it is in his name we pray. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Romans 14:1-12 (NIV)

¹Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister. Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. ¹¹For it is written,
'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'

¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Musical Interlude:

There is a Fountain filled with Blood

The Message:

“Compromise”

There was a certain fellow — whom everyone agreed was a solid, good guy — he wanted a fishing boat more than anything. Specifically, he had his eye on a center console with an Evinrude E-TEC G2 outboard motor.

His wife was not so keen on this, citing various and sundry financial obligations that, in her opinion, should be satisfied first. He listened with attentive thoughtfulness to his endearing, sensitive wife, but bought the boat anyway.

Later, sensing her displeasure, he said lamely, “I’ll tell you what: In the spirit of compromise, why don’t you name the boat? Okay, hon?” This was a concession he thought would please her.

It did.

When he later went to the dock to prepare the boat for its maiden voyage, he was startled to discover that his wife had named his new boat, his pride and joy, “FOR SALE.”

This compromise didn’t have the outcome for which he had hoped. And for many, compromise is as unpalatable as cold coffee, as unwelcome as surprise visits from relatives and as distasteful as having to kiss toothless old Aunt Fanny on the lips.

For many, “compromise” is a nasty, negative word. To compromise is to display weakness, if not commit an absolute immorality. Some preachers, especially, hate compromise.

One preacher calls compromise “hell’s Trojan horse.” Charles Stanley, long-time pastor of First Baptist Church in Atlanta, calls compromise a “landmine.” Other preachers point to the “danger” and “storms” of compromise, and offer, thankfully, how one might “weather the storms” of compromise.

Still others note the “high cost” of compromise. Some see compromise as an enemy that must be “conquered.” Some consider compromise a pact with the devil. “Better to die with conviction, than to live with compromise,” said the late Adrian Rogers, pastor, author and president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

There are very few sermons in praise of compromise. But this is one of them.

To be fair, when preachers rail against compromise, they’re generally shouting about the danger of setting aside one’s principles and core values in order to achieve unity, friendship or cooperation. Most preachers will acknowledge in a brief comment that compromise can be a good thing and perhaps even a necessary strategy. But having said this, as almost an afterthought, the pulpit pounding against compromise resumes.

Is it okay to compromise my core beliefs?

Of course, they make a point. No one wants to, or should, sacrifice their fundamental, absolute, core beliefs on the altar of public opinion. Nor should anyone surrender their values for the chimera of cooperation or unity. No one is comfortable with going along to get along.

Although — although — would it be heresy to suggest that one ought to be willing to reexamine one's core beliefs, given that yesterday's heresy is often today's orthodoxy?

And, as one surveys the theological history of the church, have not some so-called "core beliefs" changed, been modified and, on occasion, repudiated? Further, what kind of faith, what sort of mindset is it that is not afflicted, assailed and assaulted from time to time by doubts and misgivings? One might even suggest (dare it be mentioned?) that in his last hours, our Lord and Savior himself suggested a compromise — or at least asked if one was possible.

What sort of faith is an unexamined faith? Many of the great thinkers of the church wrestled with doubts.

Mother Teresa: "Darkness is such that I really do not see — neither with my mind nor with my reason — the place of God in my soul is blank — There is no God in me — when the pain of longing is so great — I just long and long for God ... The torture and pain I can't explain."

Martin Luther, whose willingness to reexamine what he had believed for most of his life led to the Protestant Reformation, once wrote about a crisis of faith: "For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members. Christ was wholly lost. I was shaken by desperation and blasphemy of God."

Charles Spurgeon, in his sermon "Desire of the Soul in Spiritual Darkness," bluntly claimed: "I think, when a man says, 'I never doubt,' it is quite time for us to doubt him, it is quite time for us to begin to say, 'Ah, poor soul, I am afraid you are not on the road at all' ..."

Pope Francis: "If one has the answers to all the questions — that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble."

These quite earnest Christians may not have been seeking a theological compromise, but the very fact that they did not consider their belief system to be set in theological concrete tells us that all this shouting about not compromising our fundamental values and core beliefs is a bit silly. The landscape of church history is littered with the detritus of whitened theological bones:

The Great Schism of 1054, which separated Eastern and Western rite churches, was about the Greek word *filioque* and its meaning.

Many of the creeds of the ancient church were formulated in the context of hotly debated theological issues, which the average pastor today would have difficulty explaining to a puzzled congregation.

The core beliefs of some Christians have banned instrumental music, icons, dramas and dancing.

The core beliefs of other Christians insist on Saturday worship, while others insist on only Sunday worship.

For hundreds of years, the core beliefs of many Christians sanctioned the institution of slavery.

As we look back on these moments in church history, and others could be cited, do we not wonder why the rival parties — all of whom were Christians and followers of Jesus — could not find a way to lay down their devotion and idolatry to a core belief for the greater glory of God?

Therefore, maybe we should hesitate a moment before saying that to compromise a core belief is akin to making a pact with the devil. Our fundamental, essential beliefs must always be available for scrutiny, open to criticism and amenable to reason.

The Strong and the Weak

But then, what about issues that are not so fundamental? Now, we look at the Romans text for today. Paul addresses this question about non-essentials in these verses.

The problem was, in short, that what Paul deemed to be non-essential, some conscientious Roman Christians believed to be fundamental, non-negotiable core values.

Unfortunately, these Christians are described as “weak,” whereas Paul identifies himself and those of his camp as “strong” believers. He writes, “We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak” (15:1). In writing in this way, he immediately sets up a rivalry: the strong vs. the weak; us vs. them. Strong is a positive word; weak is a negative word. And you have to wonder if Paul was aware that the “weak” were in the room. “Um, Paul, we’re right here! We can hear everything you’re saying.”

It’s not likely that the so-called weak were too happy with that particular classification. But they probably found some consolation by believing that although they might be weak, they were most decidedly right. And they would take orthodoxy over heterodoxy any day of the week. Call us whatever name you want, they say, but we happen to have the Bible on our side.

Paul, of course, disagrees, and if you read all of chapter 14 and verses 1-7 of chapter 15, you’ll find that he talks to the so-called “strong” Christians most.

What makes strong Christians strong, in his view, is their willingness not to patronize their weaker siblings, but rather to work with them to achieve goals they have in common — thus allowing for mutual cooperation in the spreading of the gospel.

To borrow from a Buddhist metaphor, “weak” Christians have a very small, but, of course, sturdy boat. It is extraordinarily clean and tidy, and it’s been built according to all the conventional specs and regs of the shipbuilding industry. This is a boat that will last.

“Strong” Christians have a big boat. It’s not quite so sturdy and tidy. In fact, sometimes, it’s downright messy. With so many people in the boat, everyone has their own ideas about this, that and the other thing. But what everyone has in common is a joy and love that embraces the chaos.

Still, Paul is concerned about these strong Christians, not the weak ones. The weak ones are entrenched. Nothing can be done about them. But strong Christians need to be mature to reach out to the weak and maintain a connection with them. They should be neighborly: “Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor” (15:2).

The strong should also be welcoming. They should choose their battles, and remember that most things are nonessential issues: “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions” (v. 1).

It Is Not About Us

The strong rightly remember that in all the theological fussing that so often dominates our disputes, it is not about us. It is about God. “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (vv. 7-8).

Paul hopes that the strong will remember not to sit in judgment of their weaker siblings. He asks: Who are we to judge? “Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall” (v. 4). And, in case the strong miss the point, he repeats it a few verses later: “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (v. 10). Clearly, the apostle is more irritated with these strong Christians than the weak ones. They must learn not to “pass judgment” or to “despise” their siblings in the faith.

Compromise Is Not a Dirty Word

Ambrose Bierce, lexicographer and author of the famous and amusing, *The Devil’s Dictionary*, defines compromise as “such an adjustment of conflicting interests as gives each adversary the satisfaction of thinking he has got what he ought not to have, and is deprived of nothing except what was justly his due.”

Unfortunately, in some compromises, the satisfaction of compromise is often missing. There’s often a sour aftertaste that makes both parties in the crisis leery of future negotiations.

Such parties must decide if this is okay. If it is not, then reconciliation may not be possible. If it is, the whole thing might be messy and chaotic, but glorious!

Musical Interlude:

How Firm a Foundation

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.*

As we enter into this time of prayer, O God, we offer our gratitude that you are always present to us. Instill in us a desire to so listen to others. Help us to listen with open hearts and open minds, that others might feel safe in our presence. Instill in us a spirit of serenity that others might feel accepted in your nonjudgmental grace. Free us from the tendency to label people and ideas and allow us instead to lean into mercy and kindness.

In the stillness of these moments, we acknowledge the times when we have been less than kind, merciful and open. Thank you for never banning us from your presence, loving God; help us to so love and accept others. We pray that you will, O God, call us into agreement with one another. May you urge us to end the divisions among us. This might not even be possible. For with fists clenched and jaws set, we grip tightly our perspectives and opinions, ready for battle with any who would challenge us.

Forgive us when we worship the god of Being Right. Desperate to belong somewhere, we claim allegiance to tribes of our own making — tribes of doctrine, of politics, of social location. Our quarrels reach your ears, and even as we stammer out our excuses, we know it is not your way.

For your way is excellent. Your way is relationship, discipleship, neighborliness, servanthood. Your way transcends the dim truths we might fashion from earthly assets. And your way seems impossible for us to imagine.

Help us to imagine it, O God, as we come into Your presence. Draw us into fellowship that we can share will together and also apart.

Imagine it for us, gracious God. Imagine it within us. Show us how to drop the nets, filled with our meager catch, which we clutch to ourselves, our paltry security, our self-made identity. Teach us to share. You have a better identity in mind for us. Make us into your fishers of people. Or perhaps we must simply allow ourselves to be caught by you first. Let us be one community, a tangle of faults and foibles, yet held in your net of grace. This is your way. We long for it, too.

And now as we continue in prayer let us remember the words of that prayer that Jesus taught us to lift up by 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: “Blest Be the Tie That Binds”

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

Before our Father’s throne
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one
Our comforts and our cares.

We share each other’s woes,
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.

When we asunder part,
It gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart,
And hope to meet again.

Benediction:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Postlude: Menuet from Suite Gothique Léon Boëllmann

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
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
Maria Piazza
Melanie Pouliot
Jackie Reiss' Family
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