

A person is walking away from the viewer down a path in a forest. The path is covered in a thick layer of fallen autumn leaves, mostly in shades of orange and red. The trees on either side are tall and thin, with some bare branches and some still holding orange and red leaves. The sunlight is filtering through the trees, creating a warm, golden glow. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and contemplative.

How Will You Face Death?

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

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 20, 2020

Prelude:

Classic Trio

Gordon Young

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, we are moving cautiously towards the re-opening of our church doors to worship beginning on October 18th. At first we will not be gathering every Sunday morning, the schedule will be posted and mailed out to those who are interested. We will be observing the protocols recommended by the CDC and the officials from the commonwealth. We want your feedback about the plans and your thoughts about the experiences of coming back together. We will respect that each of you are responsible adults and will observe the rules accordingly. We are currently putting a packet of information together that will be either e-mailed or mailed to each of you. Looking forward to this time of worship and praise.

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

I am the resurrection and the life, says the Lord;
Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.
So therefore let us worship God.

Opening Hymn:

“It Is Well With My Soul”

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul

(refrain)

It is well, with my soul.
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

(refrain)

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.

(refrain)

And , Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

(refrain)

A Time of Prayer:

Gentle God, you shepherd us in times of trouble. When the way seems dark, you guide us safely through. When we cannot bear to slow down, you show us the wisdom of Sabbath rest. In your presence there is life, overflowing, abundant and free.

As we rest in your goodness, teach us, O Lord, to see with your heart. Open our eyes to the world beyond our neighborhoods, and to your beloved children both near to us and far. Open our hearts to the blessed fierceness of your creation, which sustains us and yet is more powerful than we can imagine.

Anoint us with your spirit of blessing, that we might be as Christ to one another, in our welcome, compassion and care. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Philippians 1:21-30 (NIV)

21For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, 26so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, 28and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this

is God's doing. ²⁹For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— ³⁰since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Musical Interlude: Come My Way, My Truth, My Life

The Message: “How Will You Face Death?”

“What a really great book. I loved it. I hated for it to end.”

Perhaps you've said the same thing about a favorite book. Or a movie. Or a meal. Or a sporting event. Or a vacation.

When we experience truly great things, we hate for them to end.

But guess what? Research is revealing that we need for things to end. When faced with an ending, we become stronger, more focused, more productive and more positive.

According to The Atlantic magazine (November 2019), a study was done of more than 3,000 professional soccer games. It revealed that 23 percent of goals came in the final 15 minutes of the 90-minute match. The end of the game has a focusing effect, motivating players to summon their strength for a final push.

In a similar manner, deadlines inspire deal-making. An analysis of bargaining experiences found that 41 percent of deals are struck in the final 30 seconds.

Endings are important. Real life is not like the contest that pitted two pen-and-ink artists against each other. Did you hear about it? It ended in a draw.

And what about the end of life? Blog posts by terminally ill patients use language that is much more positive than the language used by people who are farther from death. The same is true for the last words of death-row inmates.

Another study looked at hospice workers and other end-of-life professionals. For these people, exposure to death causes them to “live in the present, cultivate a spiritual life and reflect deeply on the continuity of life.” In a similar manner, people who have near-death experiences report an increased sense of spiritual well-being.

So, as we come to the end of life, we might think that we will hate for it to end.

But the reality is that we need for it to end.

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul offers a surprising perspective on the end of his earthly life. “For to me,” he says, “living is Christ and dying is gain” (1:21). He knows that his ongoing life on earth means “fruitful labor” for the Philippians and for him, but at the same time he admits that his “desire is to depart and be with Christ” (vv. 22-24). Paul is writing from prison in Rome as he awaits trial for the work he has done as a Christian missionary, so it is clear that Paul is feeling that the end is near. Part of him wants his life on earth to end, so that he can be with Christ and share his resurrection life.

Like a prisoner on death row, Paul uses remarkably positive language to describe his situation. “I want you to know,” he writes, “that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ” (vv. 12-13). Because Paul is in prison, the good news of Jesus has actually spread throughout the Roman establishment. In addition, he says, “most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear” (v. 14). Paul’s courage and confidence are actually inspiring others to speak with courage and confidence.

Paul is not being misunderstood, like the poor man who died because his family couldn’t remember his blood type. “As he died, dad kept telling us ‘Be Positive,’” said his son. “But it’s hard to be positive without him.”

There is no similar misunderstanding between Paul and the Christians of Philippi. “I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith,” writes Paul, “so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again” (vv. 25-26). If Paul is allowed to live, he wants to be useful to the churches in their work of spreading the good news of Jesus. At the same time, he is not afraid for his life to end.

“Paul’s own afflictions,” writes Professor Morna Hooker, are not described in a negative way. Instead, they “are seen as an opportunity for the gospel: People talk about his case; therefore, they learn about the Christian faith, and other Christians are encouraged to make a similar stand.” Faced with an ending, Paul becomes stronger, more focused, more productive and more positive.

When Paul looks death in the face, he sees new life.

The church can take comfort from Paul’s words, especially in times of struggle and persecution. “Throughout history, persecution has often strengthened the church,” writes Hooker. “The amazing fact that oppression leads to growth reflects the paradox that lies at the heart of the gospel — namely, that God’s power is revealed through the weakness of the cross and that victory comes through apparent defeat.”

Knowing that the end may be near, Paul offers some advice to the Christians in Philippi, advice that is equally valuable to us. Live your life “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,” he writes, “so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel” (v. 27).

Paul wants us to live in a manner worthy of the gospel, always showing the grace and love of Jesus Christ. He wants us to become stronger and more focused, standing firm in one spirit and striving side by side with one mind. Such strength and unity doesn’t often happen in good times. In fact, it usually happens in difficult times.

Arlington Presbyterian Church, west of the Pentagon in Virginia, worshiped in a stone sanctuary for more than 80 years. The congregation had watched its numbers dwindle, and its aging building had become a burden. But instead of selling its \$10 million property and building a new sanctuary elsewhere, it took a bold stand for the benefit of its community.

The cost of housing is extremely high in Arlington, and many teachers, cashiers and first responders can no longer afford to live where they work. So Arlington Presbyterian joined forces with a nonprofit group that builds affordable housing. The church sold its land to the nonprofit group, and then the group constructed a six-story building on the site of the church, with five floors of affordable housing above retail space on the first floor. On the first floor, the church now rents space for worship and other activities.

The transformation of Arlington Presbyterian was not an easy process, and there was struggle both inside and outside the church. Paul's words to the Philippians provided good advice for them — to live in such a way that you are “in no way intimidated by your opponents” (v. 28). The congregation “risked it all for the sake of their neighbors,” says Ashley Goff, who became the pastor of the church after the change had begun. “It’s almost like they became curious about death, the curiosity of how to die well.”

Fortunately, the church did not die. More than 400 people have moved into the building, and Arlington Presbyterian is now meeting in its new space. The congregation has become stronger and more focused, standing firm in one spirit and striving side by side with one mind. They are experiencing new life after looking death in the face. And this, Paul would say, “is God’s doing” (v. 28).

Paul also reminds the Philippians that God “has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well — since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had” (vv. 29-30). For most of us, the privilege of believing in Christ is easy to accept, and we are happy to receive his forgiveness and new life. But “suffering for him as well”? That’s a bit tougher to swallow.

For Paul, however, believing and suffering always go together. While it is true that Christ died for us, it is also true that Christians need to die with Christ. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” Paul asks the Romans (6:3). “We suffer with him,” he says, “so that we may also be glorified with him” (8:17). Once again, our Christian faith challenges us to look death in the face.

Throughout his life, Jesus was willing to suffer as he showed love and grace to the people around him. He held nothing back, but emptied himself completely. In the same way, we are challenged to give of ourselves to show the love of Jesus to others. This is a challenge for anyone who wants to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. Fortunately, such sacrificial service not only benefits our neighbors, as we feed the hungry, house the homeless, visit prisoners and welcome strangers. It also benefits us, as it brings us into the presence of the one who suffered and died for all.

The apostle Paul was not afraid of death. While happy to serve the church in this life, he was equally willing to depart and be with Christ. When we accept that life must end, we join Paul in becoming stronger and more focused, as well as closer to Jesus Christ.

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 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: those whom are on our prayer list and those whom we raise up in our hearts.

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:**“This Is a Day of New Beginnings”**

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.

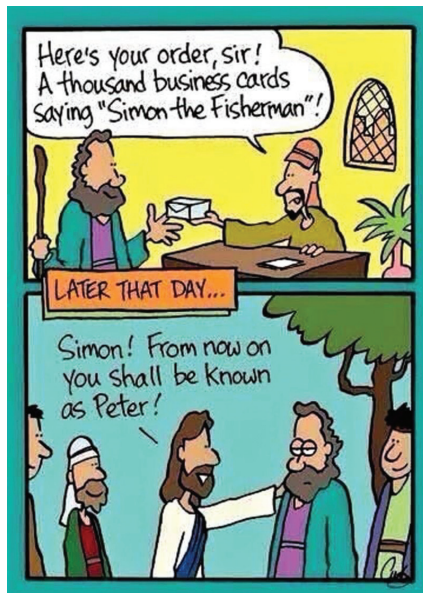
Christ is alive, and goes before us
to show and share what love can do.
This is a day of new beginnings;
our God is making all things new.

Benediction:

We stand firm in the conviction that neither death nor life, neither the present nor the future, not even anything the enemy might bring upon us, can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen

Postlude: Holy God, We Praise Thy Name

A Little Humor



Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Family of Otille (Tillie) Burpee
Becky Colwell
David Dufour
Diana Escarbie
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
Family of Reverend Charles J. Heslam, III
Jerilyn Hoffman
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
Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Arlene Sirois
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