



# **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

# *Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost*

## **September 27, 2020**

**Prelude:**

**Dear Lord and Father of Mankind**

### **Gathering Thoughts:**

Dear Brothers and Sisters, we are moving 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:**

O Lord, we give our lives to you.

Show us the right path, O Lord; point out the road for us to follow.

Lead us by your truth and teach us for you are the God who saves us.

The Lord is good and does what is right; he shows the proper path to those who go astray.

He leads the humble in doing right, teaching them his way. Amen.

### **Opening Hymn: “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”**

**#381 UMH**

Savior, like a shepherd lead us, much we need Thy tender care;

In Thy pleasant pastures feed us, for our use Thy folds prepare.

Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast bought us, Thine we are.

Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast bought us, Thine we are.

We are Thine, Thou dost befriend us, be the Guardian of our way;

Keep Thy flock, from sin defend us, seek us when we go astray.

Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Hear, O hear us when we pray.

Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Hear, O hear us when we pray.

Thou hast promised to receive us, poor and sinful though we be;

Thou hast mercy to relieve us, grace to cleanse and pow’r to free.

Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! We will early turn to Thee.

Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! We will early turn to Thee.

Early let us seek Thy favor, early let us do Thy will;  
Blessed Lord and only Savior, with Thy love our bosoms fill.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast loved us, love us still.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast loved us, love us still.

### **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:**

**Matthew 21:23-32 (NIV)**

23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’ 24 Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?” 26 But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’ 27 So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

28 ‘What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” 29 He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

**The Message: “Can We Learn From a Story About Parenting?”**

What mother would say to her daughter, “Hey fatty -- lose some weight?”

A Chinese mother -- according to Amy Chua, a professor at Yale Law School, the author of *Day of Empire and World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* and her most controversial published in February 2001, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*.

Here's the thing: Parents -- whether they're Chinese, Hispanic, American, Korean or Italian -- dream dreams for their children. Yes, they do. Mothers in the *barrio* or the inner city, in a house on the farm or a house in exurbia -- they, too, dream dreams. They want the very best for them even if they sometimes feel personally unable to deliver those dreams; they imagine their children as successful, well-rounded, involved, both interested and interesting.

And *obedient* -- every parent yearns for obedience. When parents give instructions, they want their children to respond immediately -- not after the program ends, not when this level on the computer has been beaten, but right now. Parents try to map out a course of obedience that will lead to success.

But success and obedience at what price? Just how far are parents willing to go to get the response they expect from their offspring? According to Chua, no price is too high. A handmade birthday card doesn't meet expectations? Rip it up. Your three-year-old isn't listening? Put her outside in the cold. Refusing to practice piano? Force your child to sit at the piano until she literally gnaws the instrument in frustration.

Chua's memoir on the rigors of raising her two very differently-tempered daughters has caused an uproar in parenting circles. She makes it clear that she expects nothing less than straight A's from her daughters in school and professional-quality music as a result of their endless piano and violin lessons. Nothing less will be tolerated, even if it means constant drilling accompanied by screaming matches until early hours in the morning. This tiger mom will prevail because she is convinced that she (and she alone -- her husband, parents and in-laws fruitlessly suggest a gentler tone) knows what is best for her children.

Both casual observers and parenting “experts” are sure that her exceedingly strict rules and over-the-top expectations were harmful to her children, who are now older teens (Sophia, the oldest, was accepted by both Yale and Harvard for the 2011-2012 school year). Yet when interviewed,



her daughters express gratitude for the depth of their mother's caring and an expectation that their future parenting will differ only slightly from that of their rigid mother.

What is going on? What is the best route to getting that obedient "yes" from a child in response to a request? Parents often give instructions that seem arbitrary or draconian to children. Youngsters are regularly forced to do tasks that seem ridiculous to them. And despite the parents' assertion -- "You'll thank me for this when you get older" -- children often doubt the wisdom of their parents' way. The result is a clash of wills often accompanied by a hearty "No way!" by indignant children and teens.

For many children, rebellion is a natural, even critical part of growing up. Often, children who obey simply out of fear or because they "have to" will never learn to think for themselves. A lifetime of over-scheduled calendars can create young people who cower at the thought of a free, unscripted moment. College professors worry about students who arrive on campus apparently unable to productively or creatively fill their newly found free time. College administrators complain about "helicopter parents," who hover around their children, trying to protect them from mistakes long after they have left home.

Children (and adults) need the freedom to make their own choices; by definition, this means that they will make mistakes. They will not always choose wisely. They will underestimate the amount of time it takes to complete a task. They will listen to the wild ideas of their peers while the cautions of their parents go unheeded. They will put off important tasks until the last minute and then fly into a panic.

Other children, however, not only need structure, they thrive in a structured environment where the boundaries are clearly marked.

### **Jesus tells a story about parenting**

Not surprisingly, Jesus, the single man with no children, gets it right. In today's text, Jesus tells a story which reveals the traits of the heavenly parent who has hopes and dreams for the earthly children, and yet at the same time also displays compassion and understanding. Jesus describes the father whose expectations are clear. "Go work in the field," he says with authority. The first son refuses outright, yet after reflection, thinks better of his rebellion and goes out to the vineyard. Despite his initial resistance, he obeys his father.

The second son is more devious. He puts on a good face and immediately agrees with his father's request; however, his actions do not measure up to his words. He ignores his father's wishes and never appears in the vineyard. Jesus asks the critical question, "Which of the two did the will of his father?"

The tiger mom might have issued a punishment to both sons -- the first would be reprimanded for threatening to disobey and the other for actually ignoring the father.

Jesus, however, clearly has a forgiving heart and is able to see the bigger picture. It's not the first son's *words* that are important to Jesus, but his *actions*. Jesus allows room for complaining and verbal resistance. The first son, despite his original reluctance and outward show of rebellion, soon chooses obedience. He follows the will of his father and *does the work to which he is called*. The second son, however, only talks a good game. He promises much and produces nothing of value.

Jesus points out the difference in their actions to his listeners. The first son, like the tax collectors and the prostitutes (Jesus informs his listeners), is headed toward the kingdom. Despite the mistakes of the past, this son has now chosen the right route. The scheming, double-talking chief priests and elders, like the second son, are not kingdom bound. One cannot simply talk the talk of faith and obedience. *One must walk the walk, even when it means backtracking from a poorly chosen path, and starting over down the narrow path toward eternal life.*

### **Why do we say “No” to God?**

What leads us to say “No” to God? What fuels our refusal of God? We might say no to God because *we're stubborn, afraid, doubtful, or we want to do something else*. Given the choice -- labor in the field (volunteer at the food bank, visit a sick neighbor, work on that fundraiser, forgive someone who did you wrong, reconcile with someone estranged from you) or spend another hour in front of TV -- what would one choose?

Maybe the “No” grows out of a sense of being *overworked*. Could it be that the first son refuses his father because he believes he has already done enough for the father; perhaps he considers his contribution to the family to be extensive. Clearly the father thinks otherwise and is not prepared to offer his son an early retirement package. The father sees what the son is capable of and demands more. The son has a “Who me?” moment -- haven't I already done enough for this family? -- and yet evolves into an obedient servant.

Is God too demanding?

Can God demand too much of God's people? It might seem like it sometimes. The temptation might be to say -- “no, let someone else do it. I've already given.” Or, “that's too much to ask of me”. Or, “I don't think I'm up to that challenge”. Here's hope for anyone who has ever pushed the snooze alarm one too many times and missed an important appointment. Here's good news for anyone who doubts his ability to make a difference and decides not to even

try. The first son clears the path for naysayers and hesitant, unsure wanna-be disciples alike. Here also is a challenge for any self-satisfied congregation or individual who assumes that his contribution and effort is enough.

Unlike the “Tiger Mom,” Jesus does not expect perfection. Rather, he invites his followers to learn from their mistakes, put their failings behind them, and then choose to do the right thing. This story of compassion and forgiveness is good news for anyone who can remember moments of disobedience, times of ignoring the rules, or periods of poor choices. The arms of Jesus are open wide -- like the artwork for this installment suggests. For those who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, there is a message of welcome and an invitation to try again. Past blunders will not be counted against them when they are followed by both a change of heart and a change of course. Followers will not be judged on their initial, often impulsive mistakes but rather on the final choices that lead them either closer or farther away from God. Jesus seems willing to look past the many weaknesses and failures in his followers and invites them to put their earlier bad choices behind them so that they can follow him.

There’s a message of God about the compassionate and welcoming parent depicted in the father in the story. The father issues a clear directive and has confidence in the sons’ ability to follow it. The father then allows the sons to make their own decisions on their adherence to his command. Like the father, Jesus is looking for followers who are not in mindless, lockstep precision but who, after reflection, are ready to give their all, and follow.

God’s merciful invitation is clear. The door to heaven is unlocked and the porch light has been left on to guide even wayward children home. God calls out to the children, “Come home.” All that is necessary is to say “Yes” to God, and offer hands, hearts and spirit to God’s service.

**Musical Interlude:**

**Interlude**

**Flor Peeters**

**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.*

Lord our God, we your people come to you this day fully aware that we need your presence and your help in our lives, yet aware as well that we often fail to stop and turn to you for that help. We get caught up in the troubles and

the turmoil of daily living — we become busy with the goals that we have set for ourselves and those that come to us from our work and our families and our friends. We strive to be loving, we seek joy and peace, we desire to be gentle and patient and kind, to show goodness, and to have self-control — and yet these things all too often elude us. Help us, Lord, to root ourselves more deeply in you; to seek your will for our lives; to stop and listen for your voice when we are troubled; to fully rely on you when we strive to do what is right; to remember you and trust in you when we are assaulted; to meditate on your goodness and your gracious will when we begin each day — so that like trees by a stream which send down their roots to the water, we may produce by your power the fruit of your Spirit.

Gracious God, we remember the concerns and prayers that have been lifted up this past week by members of this congregation and our community — concerns and prayers that we now pray for with them:

—For all those who are lonely, fearful or in pain;

—For those who are struggling with addictions and dependencies that cripple their living and harm the world about them.

We pray too, O Lord, for those who come fresh to our minds and hearts this day — perhaps a family member we have prayed for over many weeks or years, or a friend who is struggling to find meaning in his life, an acquaintance who needs healing, a stranger who needs the comfort of your Spirit as they grieve. Lord, hear now your people as they pray and name those names, those concerns, before you. (a time of silent prayer)

Thank you, Lord, for being our God and making us your people. Thank you for growing in us and for helping us to grow. Thank you for the ministry you entrust to us. May your will be done in us and by us, both now and forevermore. 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:**

**“A Charge to Keep I Have”**

**#413 UMH**

A charge to keep I have,  
A God to glorify,  
A never dying soul to save,  
And fit it for the sky.  
To serve the present age,  
My calling to fulfill:  
O may it all my powers engage  
To do my Master's will!  
Arm me with jealous care,  
As in Thy sight to live;



And O Thy servant, Lord, prepare  
A strict account to give!  
Help me to watch and pray,  
And on Thyself rely,  
Assured if I my trust betray,  
I shall forever die.

### **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:**

**St. Anthony Chorale**

**Joseph Haydn**

### **PRAYER LIST**

Amy Belli  
Carolyn Barney  
Jack Brigham  
Family of Otilie (Tillie) Burpee  
Becky Colwell  
David Dufour  
Diana Escarbie  
Cathy Fontaine  
Chuck Funk  
Bob and Pat Goguen  
Donald Hanks  
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

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## A Little Humor



Mrs. Jones got a little too used to  
watching online worship from home.