



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

First Sunday after Epiphany

January 10, 2021

Prelude:

Peace Be With You

Alain Perk

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

The people who sit in darkness, have seen a great light.
Arise, let us leave the gloomy night; let us behold the glorious sight;
Make straight, then, the crooked highways; exalt the valleys and make low the mountains;
To prepare the way of the Lord!
To make ready our hearts for his appearance,
Let us celebrate the Light of the World, for upon us has the Light shined!

Opening Hymn:

“This Is My Father’s World”

This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears
All nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.
This is my Father’s world, I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees of skies and seas, His hands the wonders wrought.

This is my Father’s world, the birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker’s praise.
This is my Father’s world, He shines in all that’s fare;
In the rustling grass I hear him pass; He speaks to me everywhere.

This is my Father’s world; O, let me ne’er forget,
That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father’s world; the battle is not done.
Jesus who died shall be glorified, and earth and heav’n be one.

A Time of Prayer:

O God, we come before you as a people gathered to behold the Christ, a light dawned that cannot be extinguished. In this new year, we offer special thanks for this community of faith and your faithful presence. Help us to see more clearly your glorious light, that we will open our hearts to your reign on earth and dedicate our lives to your service. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Genesis 1:1-5 (NIV)

1In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from

God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Musical Interlude: **Ach Wie Flüchtig, Ach Wie Nichtig** **JS Bach**

The Message: **“How Was the World Created?”**

Girls are as good as boys at math.

That sounds like an encouraging statement, doesn’t it? The sentence tries to send the message that both sexes are equal in their abilities. Girls, it seems to say, are equal to boys in their ability at math.

But words are very powerful, and so is the order in which words are used. Because girls are mentioned first and boys are mentioned second, the implication is that being good at math is more common or natural for boys.

What do you think? Is it true that word order makes a difference?

Well consider another statement: Boys are as good as girls at talking about their feelings. You might say, “No way, boys are not good at sharing their feelings.” But most would say that yes, girls are definitely good at this. Because girls are mentioned second, the implication is that it is more natural for girls to talk about their feelings.

Would you ever say, “Girls are as good as boys at talking about their feelings”? Probably not. It sounds backwards, doesn’t it?

Whenever we make comparisons, we include the more typical or common object as the second item in the comparison. We say “tents are like houses” instead of “houses are like tents.” Comparing zebras and horses, we say “zebras are like horses.” No one would ever say “horses are like zebras.” The more typical or common item always comes second.

Going back to the question of girls and boys and math, researchers at Stanford University have found that most people associate a natural math ability with the gender written in the second part of the sentence. The result, says one of the researchers, is that “statements that imply that boys are naturally more talented could be contributing to women’s underrepresentation.” Such statements could help cause the large gender gaps that exist in fields such as computer science and physics. The researcher recommends that adults, especially parents and teachers, “try to avoid consistently framing one gender as the standard for the other.”

Words really do shape the world that we live in.

The book of Genesis begins with God creating the universe when “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep” (Genesis 1:2). God did not create the universe out of nothing, but instead made it out of a dark, formless, watery and chaotic space — something we might imagine as swirling gas or liquid. The poet James Weldon Johnson captured this well when he wrote:

As far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.

Genesis makes clear that God was separate from creation, saying that “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (v. 2). The Hebrew word for “wind” is *ruah*, which can also be translated “spirit” or “breath.” This word reminds us that God’s spirit can come to earth as a mighty wind, such as on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), or in a gentle breath, as when Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22).

Wind, spirit, breath. All three are important words, at the heart of God’s creative work. On the first day, God created the powerful light that is absolutely essential for life, and God did it using nothing but four words, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). God used a set of words to bring order out of chaos and light out of darkness. This creative speech of God has continued throughout history, through the words of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Words create worlds.

In the novel *City of Peace*, a Methodist pastor named Harley Camden speaks about the power of words. “I’m convinced that words create reality,” Harley explains. “It’s a very biblical idea. Think of God creating the world in Genesis, saying ‘Let there be light,’ and there is light. Jesus is described in the New Testament as ‘the Word.’ When Martin Luther King Jr., said, ‘I have a dream,’ people began to see a vision of a new world of equality. Words create reality. Whether we say ‘I love you’ or ‘I hate you’ makes a huge difference.”

Words have always been critical to the creative work of God. In Genesis, this work continued when “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night” (Genesis 1:5). Day and night were created when God called these periods day and night. Then God went on to use words to create Earth and seas, vegetation, birds, cattle, and finally humankind. At the end of this creative work, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (v. 31).

In Genesis, God used divine words to create a good world for us to enjoy. But human words do not always have such a positive effect. If a friend gossips about us, we feel hurt. If strangers yell at us, we feel stung. If people speak to us with disrespect, tensions arise.

In an analysis of police body-camera footage, Stanford researchers found that police officers speak less respectfully to black citizens than to white citizens. White residents were more likely than black residents to hear a police officer say “thank you” or to offer an apology. Black citizens were more likely than white residents to be called “bro” or “dude,” and to have the officer issue commands like “hands on the wheel.”

“To be clear: There was no swearing,” said one of the researchers. “These were well-behaved officers. But the many small differences in how they spoke with community members added up to pervasive racial disparities.” This research suggests that subtle differences in language may be eroding relationships between the police and the communities they serve.

Words create worlds.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth with words alone, and our speech continues to create the world that we live in. As Christians, we are challenged to take words seriously as we follow Jesus, the One who is the Word of God in human form (John 1:14).

Through history, think of how words have been used in the church to control, diminish or oppress people. “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling,” said the apostle Paul (Ephesians 6:5). These words were used to support the institution of slavery.

“Women should be silent in the churches,” said Paul (1 Corinthians 14:34). These words were used to prevent women from preaching and teaching.

“Accept the authority of every human institution,” said the apostle Peter (1 Peter 2:13). These words gave oppressive governments permission to abuse innocent people.

These words were written in another time and place, but they continue to have a negative impact on life in the 21st century. They do not draw us closer to the God who created the heavens and the earth with a powerful word, and they do not help us to follow Jesus Christ, the human face of God.

Clearly, we need better words today.

Our speech should reflect God’s desire for equality between people of every race. “God created humankind or humanity in his image,” says the book of Genesis, “in the image of God he created them” (1:27). Every human being is created in the image and likeness of God — whether black, white, brown or any other color. Until we treat everyone as an equally valuable creation of God, at police traffic stops and at other human encounters, we are not being faithful to the word of God.

Genesis also tells us that “male and female, God, created them” (1:27). Men

and women are made equally in the image and likeness of God, a design for humanity that has been ignored through most of human history. In fact, it was just a little over a century ago, on August 18, 1920, that the 19th Amendment was ratified, giving women in the United States the right to vote. It took far too long for us to grasp the truth of the words “in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” But maybe since male comes first and female comes second, the word order indicates that females are the standard!

Finally, we need words that reflect the truth of Jesus, the Word of God, who became flesh and dwelled among us. “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you,” said Jesus; “for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another” (John 13:34).

Since words create worlds, we need to be using language that communicates the equality of the human beings created by God, as well as words that express the truth, love and mercy of Jesus.

On the first day, God brought order out of chaos and light out of darkness. We can do the same, with the words we speak today.

Musical Interlude: Let There Be Peace on Earth

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.*

Loving and creating God, the holiday is over but the work of Christmas is just beginning. Guide us as we follow in the footsteps of the one whose birth we continue to celebrate. Grant us the grace to order our lives so that others might know that we have knelt in Bethlehem and worshiped the newborn king. As we continue in this new year, let us remember to follow the star instead of the crowd. If we lose our way, help us to remember, O God, the angel songs and the gift born to us in the darkness of night and in the depth of winter that we might have life and have it abundantly.

As the light from the star guided the wise men of old, O God, so might your love shine from within us to encircle and embrace all those who have lost their way. Nowhere is the spirit of Christmas more radiantly present than in the simple faith of a child. We claim that faith as our own in the name of the Christ child, born to us this holy season.

Holy God, the holiday is over but the work of Christmas is just beginning.

And now let it begin with us as we pray with gratitude the prayer of the one who calls us to new life, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to say when we pray together “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: “We Meet You, O Christ”

We meet you, O Christ, in many a guise;
your image we see in simple and wise.
You live in a palace, exist in a shack;
we see you, the gardener, a tree on your back.

In millions alive, away and abroad;
involved in our life you live down the road.
Imprisoned in systems, you long to be free;
we see you, Lord Jesus, still bearing your tree.

We hear you, O man, in agony cry;
for freedom you march, in riots you die.
Your face in the papers we read and we see.
The tree must be planted by human decree.

You choose to be made at one with the earth;
the dark of the grave prepares for your birth.
Your death is your rising, creative your word;
the tree springs to life and our hope is restored.

Benediction:

Go forth as a light to all the world. Go following the light of the great star of Jesus’ birth. Go proclaiming hope, serving the needy; bring peace to those at war, proclaiming joy to those who sorrow, living in the light of God’s good news. Amen.

Postlude: Allein Zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ Johann Pachelbel

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
Maureen Daoust
Rebecca Driscoll
David Dufour
Diana Escarbie
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
John Hanks, Jr.
Linda Hurd
Family of Mary Jackson
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Colin Lajoie
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
Maria Piazza
Emma Pollice
Melanie Pouliot
Jackie Reiss
Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Diane Staples
Carter Stansel
Kaitlin Stansel
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 Governmental Leaders