



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

Third Sunday of Lent

March 7, 2021

Prelude:

Offrande

Flor Peeters

Focusing on the Lenten Journey:

Welcoming God, we gather here today to worship and praise you. We gather in this sacred place where, over many generations, our forebears have gathered to worship God.

You, O God are a responsive God, for you hear our prayers, our sighs, our doubts and all our fears.

We give you our thanks for your loving awareness and care of us all. And now we gather to again fulfill our commitments to our God in the presence of your people. Let us offer our sacrifice, our homage, our gifts of praise and thankfulness to our God. Amen.

A Time of Prayer:

Gracious God, the journey is long and the cross is heavy. We come today to this place of worship tired -- tired of responsibility, tired of turning the other cheek, tired of returning good for evil and tired of serving you unnoticed. We wish someone else could bear our burdens for us. We long for an oasis in our wilderness. In the quietness of these moments, help us to turn our eyes upon one who has taken responsibility, who has turned the other cheek, who has returned good for evil, who has borne our burdens for us. Enable us to enjoy our lightened load, to continue our Lenten journey, to find the oasis of your love and to drink the waters of mercy and compassion. Amen.

Opening Hymn:

“Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”

#7

Immortal, invisible, God only wise. In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.
Most blessed, most glorious, the ancient of days. Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light. Nor wanting nor wasting thou rulest in might.
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above, thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life Thou givest to both great and small; in all life thou livest, true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light, thine angels adore, all veiling their sight;
All praise we would render; O help us to see, 'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Exodus 20:1-17 (NIV)

20 Then God spoke all these words:

2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me.

4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 For six days you shall labour and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

12 Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

13 You shall not murder.

14 You shall not commit adultery.

15 You shall not steal.

16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

17 You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

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 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.*

Holy God, hear our prayers. We take great comfort in knowing that you see each one of us and know our deepest needs, and yet you have told us to come to you in prayer, and so we do so in humility and faith. God, some of us are sick -- we ask for you to heal us. Some of us are without work -- we ask that you would provide. Some of us can no longer see through our tears -- heal our hearts. We are so grateful for the many beautiful blessings you have given us. We have not forgotten them. But we know that you are not unfamiliar with our sorrows, so we give them to you now. Take them and bring beauty from ashes as only you can. And now we pray to you that prayer which 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.”

Musical Interlude:

Lord Who Throughout These Forty Days

Gordon Young

The Message:

“Laws, Lessons, and Living”

The Old Testament lesson for today is about the Ten Commandments — a fitting choice for this Third Sunday in Lent.

So, naturally, let’s talk about ice cream.

Ice cream is on every child’s and many adults list of dream desserts. Kids scream for ice cream or a variation thereof — cones, milkshakes, sundaes, bars, etc. They get excited when they hear the bells and chimes of the ice cream truck.

And, they all have their flavor preferences, too: Moo-llenium Crunch, Cookie Two Step, Tin Roof, Rocky Road, Oreo Cookies & Cream, Waffle Cone with Chocolatey Chips, Chunky Monkey, Cherry Garcia, Mint Moose Tracks and Snickerdoodle. Around here we have those special flavors that celebrate our local sports teams or those special vacation places. We all have a favorite, what is yours? For me I still love pistachio with real pistachios rather than walnuts. When I worked for Brigham’s Ice Cream there was always their Mocha Almond which was a close second to their Pistachio. As an adult my flavor pallet has changed to include things like Turkey Hill’s Bourbon Vanilla and many others. When I get to an ice cream stand there will always be something there to satisfy my taste buds.

One fast-growing ice cream company has built its success on its dominance in the diet ice cream market. In 2017, Halo Top became the best-selling pint in grocery stores, even whizzing past such industry giants as Ben & Jerry’s and Häagen-Dazs.

This relative newcomer to the ice cream game (Breyers has been around since the 1860s) ran some TV spots last spring when the pandemic frenzy was peaking. The ad shows a girl eating ice cream while a voice over explains why. Essentially, the message says that for too long we’ve been burdened by all the things we should do — but ultimately fail to do:

I “should” lose weight.

I “should” work out.

I “should” eat more salads.

I “should” skip desserts.

The tag line — as the girl grabs a pint of ice cream is: “Stop ‘shoulding’ yourself.”

The mantra is clear: We all constantly tell ourselves things we ‘should’ do. ... We believe it’s time to stop shoulding yourself.

And why not? The packaging of each pint declares in big numbers the calories: 360, 320 or 280. The product is made with natural and organic ingredients and is a “great-tasting” source of protein. No wonder we are told to “should” ourselves in only one way. We should “stop shoulding ourselves.” There’s an irony there as delicious as the ice cream itself.

But in life, we can’t stop shoulding ourselves, can we?

We should obey municipal, state and federal laws.

We should wear seat belts.

We should wear masks.
We should practice social distancing.
We should pay our taxes.

And, then, if we look at the Bible — or any sacred text — there’s a slew of “shoulding” involved in being a good Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or whatever.

We should be kind to one another.
We should be patient.
We should share with each other.
We should put others first ahead of ourselves.
We should pray.
We should love God.
We should love our neighbors as ourselves.
We should be compassionate.
We should be humble and resist pride.

There are a slew of other things we should add to this list, but I think you might get the idea.

Perhaps there is no more famous encapsulation of the importance of shoulding than the Ten Commandments itemized in today’s Old Testament reading. The “shoulds” found in this text are both positive and negative. Since Moses first chiseled them on two stone tablets, they have been copied, reproduced, installed, erected, proclaimed, translated, and repeated in a gazillion different iterations. The very mention of “ten commandments” is a reminder of our duty toward God and our fellow human beings.

In fact, the two tablets seem to reflect this division: The God Rules (vv. 1-11) and the People Rules (vv. 12-17). But, really, the divisions are intertwined. Our understanding of neighborly obligations flows from our knowledge of God as a unitary and supreme God of creation who demands unwavering obedience and worship. Ethical monotheism. There is no ambiguity. There is one God. We know this God. We know what this one and true God wants. So we do not murder, lie or steal because this is not the nature of the God we worship.

It’s analogous to the family at home. The behavior of the children reflects the ethical and moral values of the parents.

Although the rules of the second tablet flow from the first, we don’t have to be religious or super-godly to understand their importance. If we live in community, we must abide by the shoulds and oughts. It’s the only way a community can survive and thrive. If you don’t live in a community, i.e. you’re living an isolated life in a cave on the shoulder of a mountain, well, the stealing, murdering and lying commandments-don’t apply. You’re by yourself and have only yourself to answer to.

The rest of us, however, live in communities. Perhaps this is why God stops the pilgrimage to Canaan here at Mount Sinai. It is here that God tells the Israelites that they are a family. We are a community and therefore some expectations apply. As we continue the journey to Canaan, we must live by certain rules and observe some specific boundaries. So, just to be clear, here is how we’re going to function and operate going forward.

This is what our worship space is going to look like.
This is what we’re going to sing.
This is how we’re going to worship.

This is what we're going to eat and not eat.

This is who can and can't get married.

This is what happens to those who break the commandments.

These are the leaders we will have, and this is what they will do.

The Ten Commandments, then, are only a small part of all that God explains during this stop at Sinai. Here, the charter is established. Now that they're organized, they can proceed.

Of course, it didn't work out quite that way. Somehow, the Israelites managed to turn a three-month trip into a 40-year adventure.

Perhaps they had the same problems — moral relativism and situational ethics — that many people have today. What is right is wrong; what is wrong is right. How can it be wrong if it feels so right? If it feels right, do it, because anything goes. The Pleasure Principle. What's wrong for you might be right for me, and so on.

But even in the face of moral relativism, if there are moral absolutes in the universe (and there are), it would be hard to argue against the notion that commandments 5-10 are right up there at the front of the list. Who would seriously suggest that it is morally permissible to murder, steal, lie and covet your neighbor's possessions? No reasonable atheist, secularist, humanist, or person of any religious tradition would disagree that these "shoulds" or "should nots" are as absolute and inflexible as possible in any discussion of ethics and moral law.

This is so widely accepted that every municipality in the country employs a police force to ensure that these commandments are observed to the letter.

And why do we hire police officers?

Because we live in community. We're in perfect agreement with the intent of these commandments. We certainly don't want anyone stealing our stuff! And if someone in our family is murdered, we'd like the culprit to be brought to justice. And we don't want anyone to slander our good name, telling lies about us. And although the police can't do too much about how well we honor or how badly we dishonor our parents, or about whether we're coveting our neighbor's Tesla Model X, we do want the police to monitor these other things.

Having some "shoulds" in our life is a good thing. If all of us respect the "shoulds," our communities and cities will be better places to live.

That said, don't we get tired of being responsible citizens, of obeying the rules all the time? Maybe not. Perhaps we're comfortable living within the rules. Some people aren't. They have a problem with authority. They want to blow off some steam, be crazy for a while, flaunt the rules. They want to take off the masks, symbolic of freedom from authority.

Which is why God invented fishing ... and low-fat ice cream.

So, this ice cream company says, be self-indulgent. Forget the "shoulds." Stop "shoulding" yourself.

We get it.

But, the reality is that we can't stop observing the shoulds. We must, absolutely must, respect the shoulds and should-nots. We owe it to ourselves and to others.

But — playing devil's advocate — perhaps the ice cream company has touched on something important. Is it possible that there are some things we should stop shoulding about? After all, when you add up all the federal, state and municipal commandments we're required to obey (at the risk of fines or jail time), and add to that the religious, ethical and moral commandments we're supposed to follow,

there's no point adding to our "should" burden unnecessarily, is there?

For example: Perhaps, many of us have become slaves to cultural perceptions of beauty and fashion. Is it possible we should stop shoulding ourselves about the need for an hourglass figure or six-pack abs?

Perhaps, we also have been burdened by the need to be perfect: perfect parents, perfect super-moms or cool moms, perfect super-dads. Or the perfect husband, the perfect wife, the perfect employee. News flash: Thou are not perfect and thou shalt not strive to be.

It's also possible that we are oppressed by the need to keep up with everyone else. We feel that we must match the achievement of our peers, that our lifestyle should be similar to those in our income bracket. We're slightly embarrassed when we lag behind others — our friends, family or colleagues — in terms of professional advancement or material and financial status.

We might also feel pressure to yield to certain ideological positions that in our hearts we know to be antithetical to our religious convictions. We might feel a lot of pressure to think and act in ways that are politically correct, but inside, we're just not feeling it.

We also might suffer in a general way from the "shoulds" and "oughts" of expectations. In the effort to meet the expectations of others, we might bring calamity down upon ourselves physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Striving to meet anyone's expectations except God's and those reasonable demands we place on ourselves can have serious negative outcomes.

When to obey the oughts and the shoulds of the world is a call only we can make. The counsel of friends and family is important, but ultimately, we alone must decide what we should and should not do.

But when God's talking, there's no ambiguity. There's no argument about whether to be obedient. We should.

"But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority...'" (Acts 5:29).

Jesus said, "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14).

"Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it" (Psalm 119:35).

The psalmist is on to something. He "delights" in obeying the Lord. Do we chafe under a spirit of obligation when we do something that brings joy to our spouses or our children? No! In fact, it gives us joy, too!

When we can delight in obeying God's laws, the "should" factor has been removed. It is no longer an obligation; it is a joy — even as it is a joy for us to serve those we love on this earthly plane.

"Happy are those who ... delight ... in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. ... In all that they do, they prosper" (Psalm 1:1-3). Amen.

SHARING OF THE BREAD AND CUP:

CALL TO CONFESSION:

PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

Forgive us, Lord, for our preoccupation with things; for believing we would be happy if we only had more; for neglecting family in the pursuit of advancement; for

giving low priority to the kingdom of God; for judging right and wrong on the basis of profit; for allowing discontent to cloud our lives; for pampering the body while starving the soul. With cries and petitions, we call out to you in the midst of our hurting. In the agony of our pain, we reach for you. In the turmoil of our brokenness, we plead for your healing touch. Save us, God. Save us from death, illness, pain, depression, economic oppression, racial inequity, fear, loneliness, violence and hate. We accept your grace and providential care for us in every area of life and cling to your assurance of love and acceptance. Forgive us, Lord, for our preoccupation with the things of the world, and enable us to seek first your kingdom and your righteousness. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE:

Know that God always goes with us. Know that God is always there to lead us, guide us, forgive us, comfort us and encourage us. Know that God is always near to us, now and forever. Amen.

SHARING IN THE BREAD AND CUP:

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING:

O Lord, Giver of Bread, many times we have tasted your kindness and found you to be good to all your children. When, like Israel's children, we walked the ungriving desert, your provisions sustained us daily. When, like the prodigal, we were brought to our senses by hunger and need, you awaited our return with feasting and joy. You, O God, are the nourishing presence giving refuge to all who seek your love. For mercy poured out like manna, we praise you and thank you, O Lord, Giver of Bread. Amen.

Closing Hymn:

“Blest Are the Pure in Heart”

#214

Blest are the pure in heart, for they shall see our God;
the secret of the Lord is theirs, their soul is Christ's abode.

The Lord who left the heavens our life and peace to bring,
to dwell in lowliness with men, their pattern and their king.

Still to the lowly soul he doth himself impart
and for his dwelling and his throne chooseth the pure in heart.

Lord, we thy presence seek; may ours this blessing be:
give us a pure and lowly heart, a temple meet for thee.

Benediction:

Go now into the world. Go now, following the example of our Lord Jesus. May your lives reflect God's love and grace. May your lives reflect the life and teachings of Jesus. May we continue on this Lenten journey, ever growing closer to Jesus Christ and ever growing more perfect in God's love.

Go now in God's peace. Amen.

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
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
Family of Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
The Staples Family
Diane Staples
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