**JULY 12 WORSHIP SERVICE**

**GREETING**

Good morning everybody. I hope July is turning out to be a good month for you. I hope the weather is good, but as you know, we are pre-recording our worship services for several weeks in July to accommodate Jeff Hobart, our Director of Music Ministry’s vacations, as well as my own vacations! And so I’m greeting you a little before July 12th, but this service you will see on July 12th on Sunday morning. So I hope the month has gotten off to a good start for all of you, and we’re here to worship God! So, friends, no matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, know that you are welcome here. We’re delighted to be together, and we are grateful for the opportunity to worship through the virtual means. So welcome to our service this morning.

Please take a moment with me now to settle ourselves down, sink down into our hearts, and become more and more aware of the reason that we’ve gathered together today, which is to worship God. So, let us pray.

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

The Spirit of God moves among us, binding us in covenant with faithful people of every time and place.

The Spirit of God moves within us, empowering us to proclaim the gospel to all people.

The Spirit moves through us, making us channels of God’s love.

As we gather to worship God together this morning, we open ourselves to the Spirit of the living God made known to us through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Let our worship begin.

**MUSIC**

**INVOCATION and the Lord’s Prayer**

This morning I am greeting you from my studio in the basement of my home, and you might be wondering who that painting is of that little girl. Well, that’s a painting of my youngest daughter Kate, who’s approaching 40, and my sister Kate Furler is a watercolor artist, and she painted that beautiful image of Kate when she was probably 4 or 5 years old. And the funny thing about it is that I had that framed recently to hang in my studio here, and I thought it was *her* daughter Fiona! But it turns out, no no no, this is Kate herself. So it is just remarkable to me the resemblance between my youngest daughter and *her* daughter Fiona. So I’m glad to have her with us in worship this morning with us. So let’s now come to the time of invoking God’s spirit in our morning. So, let us pray.

*You who have created us and who sustains us: We come with thanksgiving for these moments when we can ease the pace of our lives and listen for your voice. Create a spirit within us that truly draws us towards you and toward our brothers and sisters; a spirit deep, perceptive, gentle and bold. Clear our minds, oh Holy One, open our hearts, and touch us with your presence and your powers. We offer this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, our friend and our Savior, who 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.*

**OFFERING**

We come to our offering now, and it’s through our offerings that we identify with the cause of Christ. We proclaim concern for all people, and name all people as our own next-of-kin. We identify with their suffering and their grief, and we rejoice when good comes to them. Both our material resources and our personal time and effort are offered here to extend the body of Christ into this moment in history, and into the whole world.

There are several ways, friends, that you can make donations to our church, or financial offerings. You can mail to the church at First Congregational Church in Randolph, 1 South Main Street, Randolph, MA 02368, or you can donate now through our website at [www.firstuccrandolph.org](http://www.firstuccrandolph.org). At the bottom of the cover page there on our website, you will see a place where you can make your offering. And that will bring you to another page where you can follow the prompts that lead you to the donate button. Our morning offering will gratefully be received.

And now we will hear from a young woman who has offered so much to our church, both through her beautiful music, and now also through her work with the Mission Board of our church. Kate Tardiff is the co-chair of our Mission Board, and she is a recent graduate of Simmons College with her degree in Library Science. So, Kate, we are grateful to you, and to Cheryle Totten, for being the co-chairs together this year of our Mission Board, and we’re excited to hear what you have to tell us this morning. Here is Kate Tardiff.

**MISSION MOMENT Kate Tardiff**

Hi, everyone!

For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Kate Tardiff, and I’m one of the co-chairs of the Missions Committee. When we’re able to meet together physically, you might see one of the members of Missions up in the pulpit every few weeks letting you know what we’re doing and ways you can help. While we can’t all meet in the sanctuary now, the committee has been meeting virtually and working to help our community. Today and over the next few months we’ll be doing Missions Moments in the service to connect with the congregation and keep you updated.

Missions’ recent work has been focused on racial justice and equality. After the killing of George Floyd, Davine Holness was interested in ways the church could take a stand for racial justice and against violence. She discussed this with Cheryle and Pastor MaryLou; together they came up with three “asks” to bring to the June All-Church Committee meeting to call the church to action. The ACC members agreed to all three asks. You may have seen the results of our first ask, the “Black Lives Matter” banner that’s currently hanging on the front of the church. The ACC meeting thoughtfully discussed what phrasing to use for our sign and decided on “Black Lives Matter”, as it’s a simple and direct phrase that’s supported by our parent body, the UCC. The UCC’s website states that "When a church claims boldly 'Black Lives Matter' at this moment, it chooses to show up intentionally [and take a stand] against all given societal values of supremacy and superiority or common-sense complacency. By insisting on the intrinsic worth of all human beings, Jesus models for us how God loves justly, and how his disciples can love publicly in a world of inequality. We live out the love of God justly by publicly saying #BlackLivesMatter. " We thank everyone who collaborated on the sign, and we’re happy to be able to walk the path of equality and justice for all, following where our Savior led.

The other two asks that we brought to the meeting were fulfilled as well. The second thing we asked was for a statement to come from the church addressing the recent killings and voicing support of racial justice. This was fulfilled through a beautiful statement written by Jason LaPlanche and published by the Randolph Interfaith Clergy Council—it appears in the Missions message in the June Lamp Lighter if anyone would like to read it. Finally, our third ask was education, for us to learn about racial justice for the modern era and for us to critically examine ourselves. To fulfill this goal, the Deacons will be developing an education program, and Missions looks eagerly forward to supporting it. There is always more to learn, and we are ready to do the work to better understand the world we live in and hopefully help create a better one.

Missions has also been working to support the people of Randolph throughout the COVID crisis. We’ve donated to several different funds that are supporting Randolph in different ways. Today we’d like to spotlight one fund we’ve donated to that’s doing good in the community. It’s called the Resilient Randolph Fund. This fund, developed by the Randolph Resiliency Committee and run by the United Way, is designed to help individuals and families stay afloat. It helps cover the essential needs of those who need help, including things like food, rent, mortgages, utilities, and medications. If you’d like to donate to the Resilient Randolph Fund, you can do so online by visiting unitedwaymassbay.org and clicking the link to Randolph’s fund in the COVID-19 tab on the menu bar. You can also send a check to United Way of Massachusetts Bay, PO Box 51381, Boston, MA 02205-1381. Please make checks out to “United Way of Massachusetts Bay” and include “The Resilient Randolph Fund” in the memo of your check.

That’s all I have for you today, but Missions will continue to meet throughout the summer- if there’s a cause that’s close to your heart or if you see a need in the community that needs to be addressed, feel free to let us know. I hope everyone is having a great, safe summer, and I can’t wait to see you all again!

**JOYS AND CONCERNS**

Thank you, Kate. And, to all of our Mission Board, and members of our church who participate in the call that Jesus has given us to serve one another, to serve God, to serve our neighbors. So, we are grateful for the work that you are doing on behalf of our church.

* As we come to our joys and concerns now, I’m happy to say that my niece Casey Gifford, who lives out in California - San Francisco - has given birth to two healthy baby girls, and I’ve only seen pictures, but they are just beautiful, *beautiful*, little girls. One is named Cora and the other is named Sloan. So congratulations to Casey and Donaldo, on the birth of their two little girls.
* I also want to give you an update at this point - which, again, is pre-recorded - I wanna just say that Lee Parson’s son Dana seems to be coming along. I know he’s been moved out of ICU, and he still remains, however, at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital
* I’d like to offer continued prayers for healing for Don Holness and Will Adams as they heal from recent medical situations.
* As well, I’d like for us to keep in our prayers this morning those who have lost loved ones during these months that we’ve been apart. So,
  + I’d like you to keep Ruth Olsen in your prayers this morning on the loss of her son Charlie just a few short months ago.
  + As well as, do keep Pam White in your prayers, who lost her mom.
  + And Jonathan Ramage on the passing of his mother as well. So let’s keep these families in our hearts and in our minds as they move forward after having such devastating losses to the families.

Friends, I always invite you to pray for yourselves as well - what’s going on in your life, what’s on your heart today - that you would lift those before God. Situations, circumstances, loved ones, yourself. So, let us pray together now in silence.

**PASTORAL PRAYER**

*Compassionate God, we thank you, that you hear every prayer that comes from our hearts: those who rejoice at a baby’s new birth; and those who mourn when the circle of life is complete, when the loss of a loved one weighs heavy on their hearts.*

*We pray today for those who are grateful when their work meets with success; and for those who suffer because they can find no work;*

*We pray for those who are bored, not having enough to do; as well as those who are tired, having too much to do;*

*We pray for those who are surrounded by the love of families and friends; and we pray for those who are lonely.*

*We thank you for hearing us in every situation in life, God, for we all play each of these roles sooner or later in our lives. Help us to support one another, rejoicing with those who rejoice, and weeping with those who weep. For we want to be joined together as members of the body of Christ, in unity and in love, loving one another and serving the world. We want, like Jesus, to respond to each human being who crosses our path. We want to respond with sensitivity and compassion. And it is in His name, Jesus Christ’s name, that we pray this and all of our prayers. Amen.*

**SCRIPTURE READING**

### (Marriage Feast) or Great Banquet - [Matthew 22:1-14](http://www.biblestudytools.com/search/?t=niv&q=mt+22:1-14)

Today’s Scripture reading comes from the Book of Matthew, Chapter 22, Verses 1 through 14.

* Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

“Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’

“But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

“Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So, go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So, the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless.

“Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

“For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

**SERMON LET THE PARABLES SPEAK; *THE GREAT BANQUET;* Matthew 22:1-14**

Last week we began a series called “Let The Parables Speak” and each week I’ll be focusing on one of Jesus’ parables in the Gospels. And so last week we focused on the story of the good Samaritan, and the lessons that we gleaned from that had to do with mercy and compassion.

And today we’re going to be talking about another parable in this series, and this one is called The Great Banquet, or The Marriage Feast. Now, my hope, by discussing parables week after week with you: that we will grow together in discovering just how the stories that Jesus told so long ago to the people are still relevant to us today and that we can relate to these stories. Jesus had the wisdom to simplify profound spiritual truths that He needed to share with humanity in the form of relatable stories which are easy to understand.

A parable is a tale about a simple, common subject, to illustrate a much deeper, valuable lesson. The definition of the word “parable” is “a place to place something side by side, for the purpose of comparison.”

Today’s story begins with an analogy, as Jesus addressed the Pharisees and the elders, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.” This parable, the Great Banquet, as you will see, utilizes the full story to produce the spiritual lessons of *worthiness and grace*.

Without repeating the whole story as was just read, let’s think about first the characters in this story, and who or what they represent. The term *King* is used to represent God because the Jewish people that Jesus was speaking to didn’t use that word *God*. The *son* in the story refers to Jesus. And the *wedding banquet* refers to the heavenly banquet where the people will be invited to join Jesus in all eternity.

Who was invited to this wedding banquet? First it was the rich and the famous, who refused to attend. The second time they were invited, they not only refused to attend, but they killed the King’s messengers as well. And the King became very angry and sent his armies to destroy these people and to burn their cities. So the king had the banquet all prepared, his oxen, everything was all cooked and ready for the people.

So he sent servants out to just invite the people on the street. “Invite everyone you see to come to the banquet.” And so, it was a grand party indeed, but, you know, there was one man that was not properly dressed. And this upset the King so much. So the King asked him, “Friend, why are you not dressed in wedding garb?” And the man just stood silent; he didn’t have an answer for the King, and so the King had him thrown out into the darkness where he said there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Commentators do believe that this was because the man, when they talked about his wedding garb, what was meant was that he wasn’t prepared. He was not prepared and he could not answer the king’s simple question: What are you doing here?

He concludes this story - Jesus concludes this parable - by saying that *many are invited, but few are chosen.*

In a post from an article called the Gospel Coalition, called “[What Did Jesus Mean by ‘Many are Called, but Few are Chosen’?](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-did-jesus-mean-by-many-are-called-but-few-are-chosen)” a man named Guy Waters sheds some light on this parable, and particularly that last line, where he says, “For many are called, but few are chosen.” What are we to make of this particular line? How does this ending statement relate to the parable, and why did the king cast that man out? Waters explains that through the parable, Jesus is highlighting that there are different presentations of the Gospel. The first one is that all people are called- we’re all called; we’re all invited to be part of the life of Christ, the body of Christ, to sit at his table. But the second part of this is that not only are we called, everybody called, but not everybody is chosen. And I believe what he’s talking about is that this means that this man, and many people today, haven’t prepared themselves to actually sit at that banquet. They have not participated in the life of Christ fully as they might. So, many are called to the table, but not all are chosen to stay.

And so, we might think of these two terms as: those that are called - this is an external call that comes to us. The Bible is a book that we read and we share, and these are all kind of out-going parts of us. But the internal part of the Gospel is how the Gospel changes us, how the story of Jesus Christ and his birth, life, death, resurrection, his purpose in life, his mission in life - how these have changed us internally, and what difference they’ve made in our lives. And I believe that that’s what we’re talking about here as far as “the chosen”. And this might even be interpreted as a two-way street. We are called or invited into the life of Christ, and as we study, as we learn, as we grow, as we practice Jesus’s commandments to love God and to love our neighbor, that we also - we choose. We make a decision in our lives to follow Jesus. So not only have we been chosen, but we also choose Jesus as our Savior. I suppose there’ll be many other interpretations of this particular line and this particular story, but that’s the one I would offer to us today.

We should be looking for opportunities at any time in our lives to share the good news of the Gospel. We should try to help others to understand God’s holy word and help them to choose Jesus Christ as well. So many of us have had these true, heart-changing experiences and encounters with Jesus in our lives, that it really is given to us to share that with others. Some may be not so profound, maybe some just a change of heart or a different way of looking at someone, or looking at ourselves, even, allowing ourselves to change, and to grow, and to be inspired by God’s holy spirit as we are given the grace to respond effectively to God’s call and count ourselves as children of God.

I spoke at the beginning saying that the lesson of this banquet here is about worthiness, and it’s about grace. And it’s also about preparation. Yes, we are invited to the Lord’s table. We are invited to sit with Jesus in eternity, but - and here comes the rub here, here comes the controversy and debate that’s gone on for millennial at this point, or maybe it’s millennium. Are we worthy because of God’s grace, and/or are we worthy because of the works that we do? There are lots of different ways that we might look at this worthiness that we’re talking about today, but worthiness is defined as character and value that we have. And we have a lifetime to develop our character, to be the good, kind, loving, thoughtful, justice-seeking people that God calls us to be and that Jesus indeed leads us to be. Worthiness also implies merit - and earning or a deserving - and so there again is that rub. Are we saved through grace? Are we saved through our works? Are we saved through both? I think every person might answer that a little bit differently, so I’ll just leave that there.

But I do want to conclude this morning by offering a little bit of a book- of a psychologist I came across, this gentleman named Saul Levine. He’s both a medical doctor and a psychologist who wrote a book called *Our Emotional Footprint.* And he talks about- he asks the question “What makes a person worthy?” And so I’ll just- I’ll go through his points briefly with you. There are four of them; he calls it the Four B’s, and the first one is Being, the next is Belonging, the next one is - wait a second, I have it right here - Believing, and then the fourth one is Benevolence. And he says the first three - Believing, Being, and Belonging - they all lead to Benevolence, or a generous heart. And so what he has to say is that Being is something that’s personal, and in our being we have the challenge in our lives of developing self-acceptance, learning how to love ourselves just as we are, being at ease with ourselves, being at ease with others in spite of mistakes that we may have made, in spite of faults and limitations. Being is about redeeming our good qualities, bringing our good qualities forth, and when we make mistakes, learning to forgive ourselves.

The second one, Belonging, is about our social attitudes. Belonging to groups is important. We’re social beings, and belonging to a group, whether it’s our congregational group, a club, a team, or some other community activity, that we are able to feel connected to others, that we have a comfort with others who share our values and traditions. And we provide support, respect, and friendship back and forth to one another.

And he says the third thing is both ethical and spiritual: that’s Believing. A sense of believing refers to guiding values of our ethical behavior in our lives. We are human beings and we have a divine mystery that is before us each and every day. We can truly live in awe, as we even just go outside and look at the night sky, or wake up early in the morning and hear the birds singing. These are all part of God’s creation. Who can help but just stand in awe of the beauty and the grandeur of the world that God has created for us?

And with these three aspects of our lives - our personal lives, our social lives, and our ethical and spiritual lives - in position, in place, then we are led naturally to a Benevolence in a way of life: an awareness that we need to be kind and generous and that we - each one of us - can truly have a positive effect on others. Benevolence is a culmination of the other three B’s. Thinking about these - who we are, our being, having an appreciation of ourselves, belonging and having an appreciation and a sense of kindred spirit with others, and believing in our God, believing in the awe and the beauty of the creation that we are blessed to inhabit - these are all part of our essence, as we say, the essence of our lives.

Now, to sum it up today, friends, we are all invited to the great banquet. We are all called to the banquet, and how we respond is our internal choice. It is our internal choice. If we are chosen by the grace of God, I believe that part of that is because we have chosen to follow Jesus. I believe that we have a choice. Having heard the Gospel, I do believe that we have a choice to be called and to be chosen. I’ll end there for today. So, I pray that something that I’ve said today will resonate with you and that you will recognize your own worthiness by the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

**MUSIC**

**BENEDICTION**

As we conclude our service of worship this morning:

*Go into the world with faith, trusting all will receive you.*

*Go into the world with hope – with God’s will before you and with great dreams in your hearts.*

*Go into the world, friends, with love – love for all people, serving with those in whom Christ lives and laboring for those for whom Christ died. And the faithfulness of God: bring that into the world. The hope which quickens God’s Spirit within us. Bring the love of Christ that is with us all. In His name. Amen.* Go now in peace, my friends, to love and serve the Lord. Amen