

# Lakewood Congregational Church

*A Congregation of the United Church of Christ*

Sunday, August 16, 2020

An Order of Worship to be followed in your home, along with our  
worship video on your own  
Preferably at 10:00am



## Welcome and Announcements

Welcome to worship on this Sunday.

We are glad you're worshipping with us today. Please know that no matter who you are and where you are in life's journey you are welcome and embraced among us to worship a loving God who welcomes us all.

When you begin your in-home worship service, pause to center yourself and then hold your palms towards the computer screen or to your heart and imagine the energy of connection. Think of many of the people you love at Lakewood Congregational Church and the Body of Christ throughout the world, and feel the ways in which our hearts are connected to yours.

Say, "May the Peace of Christ be with you"

I have a couple of quick announcements about next week. Our association, the Living Water Association of the United Church of Christ has compiled a service for all of the churches in our area to participate in. It's a wonderful way to be connected across the lines of churches in our area and know that we are worshipping together as the United Church of Christ. So we will offer that service as our Sunday service, but we will also be offering Communion and a blessing in the Beck Center parking lot with live music and just an opportunity to connect and receive a blessing on Sunday from 11:00-1:00. Stay tuned for more information about that event.

## Offering and Contribution Collection

Please consider fulfilling your pledges during this time. Financial gifts are always welcome, and our church feels the call to respond to the needs around us as they arise. Financial stability allows us to do so more effectively. So, let us give generously of our time, talent, treasure to further the work of God in our community. You can do so in the following ways:

- Writing and mailing a check to Lakewood Congregational Church, 1375 W. Clifton Blvd., Lakewood, OH 44107
  - Texting STEWARD to 44-321
  - Sending a gift through your bank's online bill pay
  - By using the donate button on the church's website [www.lcc-church.org](http://www.lcc-church.org)
  - Call the church office at (216) 221-9555 to discuss other options
- Let us Worship God.

## Prelude

*"Ye people, rend your hearts...If with all your hearts you truly seek me"*

From *Elijah* by Felix Mendelssohn

Brian Skoog, tenor; Ben Malkevitch, piano  
(a remote collaboration)

## Call to Worship

Join me in our spoken call to worship.

One: Here we can come together, people searching for healing and hope:

**Many: here we are met by the One who would bless us with abundant life.**

One: Here we are called to gather as the family of God:

**Many: we may find those who are strangers, yet are siblings of ours.**

One: Here we discover the truth that God makes no distinctions among us:

**Many: here we are welcomed and embraced by the One whose arms are open to all.**

## Invocation

Maker of Our Days, you created each of us unique beings with differing strengths and weaknesses. Help us not only to use our strengths to assist others but also to allow others to use their strengths to meet our weaknesses.

Restorer of Our Souls, you have seen the parched places in our lives, along with the devastation thrust upon us by the action or inaction of others. Meet us in the places of our deepest pain so that our facades of self-sufficiency might fall away, and we might be drawn into right-relationship with you and one another.

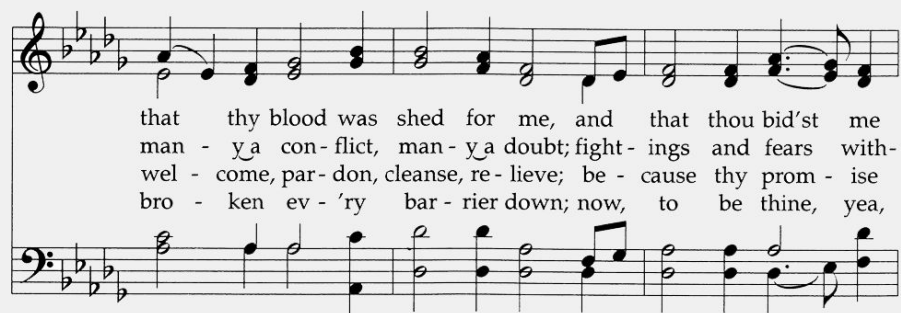
Breath of Our Lives, without you we are but a mound of clay. Fill us with your presence, invigorate our worship, set us on fire so that others might be drawn into your light and nurtured by the warmth of your loving care. In your name we pray, Amen.

## Hymn *Just As I Am*

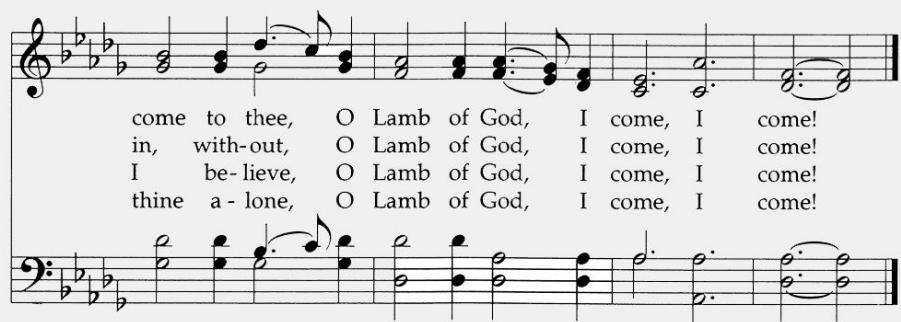
Brian Skoog, tenor; Ben Malkevitch, organ  
(a remote collaboration)



1. Just as I am, with - out one plea, but  
2. Just as I am, though tossed a - bout with  
3. Just as I am, thou wilt re - ceive, wilt  
4. Just as I am, thy love un-known, hast



that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bid'st me  
man - ya con - flict, man - ya doubt; fight - ings and fears with -  
wel - come, par - don, cleanse, re - lieve; be - cause thy prom - ise  
bro - ken ev - 'ry bar - rier down; now, to be thine, yea,



come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!  
in, with-out, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!  
I be-lieve, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!  
thine a - lone, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

## Pastoral Prayer

When we are alone, you make us known to our siblings.  
When we are lonely, you whisper, 'come closer,' inviting us into  
your heart.  
Great is your love for us, Welcoming God.

When we wander lost and afraid, you take us by the hand, so we  
may settle in your kingdom. When we hunger for the crumbs of  
hope which the world offers to us, you feed us with the fullness  
of your joy.  
Great is your grace for us, Accepting Christ.

When those around us make clear they want nothing  
to do with us, ever, you persist and you abide.  
When we stand on despair's welfare line, you invite us to come  
to a sumptuous feast.  
Great is your hope for us, Embracing Spirit.

Make that love, grace, and hope known to us as we face  
adversity: for physical strength and emotional healing, for  
persistence and resilience, for compassion and justice, for the  
courage and fortitude to walk this leg of the journey.

We call especially for your presence upon educators and school  
employees, for our own Haynes Nursery School and for the  
school districts around us. We call for your presence on  
healthcare networks and all who work to understand the  
complications of our collective public health. We call for your  
presence in each of our lives in all of the unique ways we are  
impacted by the current state of our world.

God in Community, Holy in One, you embrace us and welcome us into your heart and your hopes, and we feel you so strongly when we pray as Jesus taught us:  
Our Father . . .

### **Invitation to the Offering**

In times of plenty and want, God provides for our deepest needs. Give generously out of the abundance of God's blessing so that in these challenging times God's work might continue.

### **Dedication Prayer**

Holy God, you are our provider.  
We dedicate to your service our lives and these offerings from your blessing and our labor.  
Work in us and through us to extend your love and care, here and around the world. Amen.

### **Scripture Reading, read by Paul Pierce**

Matthew 15: 21-28

*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.*

### **Message**

\*\*\*We've included this transcript, word-for-word, for the benefit of people who do not have audio access on their computer. Please keep in mind that it is written in a way it's spoken, so the grammar/sentence structure may feel a bit awkward to read. Even so, this feels like the best way to communicate to as many people as possible.

God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When I was in seminary, one of our first year requirements was to do contextual education-- a field placement-- at an area non-profit organization. The field placement I had was at an agency called Nurses for Newborns Foundation. The foundation provides a safety net for families most at-risk in order to prevent infant mortality, child abuse and neglect by providing in-home nursing visits that promote healthcare, education, and positive parenting skills. The foundation serves counties throughout both Missouri and Tennessee, but the scope of my field placement was in St. Louis. The bulk of the work I did throughout that first year was in grant writing, which I'd never done before, but on two or three occasions I had the chance to go with the nurses on what we called a ride-along, to go into the homes of the clientele and see the front-lines work of the agency.

The nurses with the agency would visit the homes and conduct mother and child health and developmental assessments, and screen for risk factors such as depression, drug abuse, domestic

violence, and develop a plan of action to ensure the baby and mother's health, safety, and optimum development. I remember several of the homes, though have no way of knowing anything about how they're doing now. I remember an HIV+ mother with a toddler with down syndrome and newborn twins. I remember sitting on the end of a young woman's bed looking at her sweet baby boy's face while she asked us if we thought he looked more like one man or another, because she wasn't sure which one was the father. But perhaps the most beautiful moment I had in that field placement was when I held the most beautiful, fragile, sweet newborn baby-- just a few days old with a low birth weight, with sweet little tufts of dark curly hair all over his head. His mother was young-- 15 or 16-- still in school. And she, her aunt who she lived with, and the nurse talked about how to care for a baby who had to be weaned off a cocaine dependency. I sat near them as they talked, looking in the eyes of this sweet, innocent baby, sharp and alert, and I rocked him and prayed with him and hoped that someday he would know that he was made in the image of God, just as his mother was, just as his great aunt was, just as the nurse was, just as I was.

This was the Gospel. Holding that baby, listening to that conversation. Watching the non-anxious presence of that nurse and the determination of that young mother. It was the Gospel of Jesus Christ right there, tiny and practically weightless in my hands.

What was always, each and every time, evident in these visits, was the deep love and commitment these mothers gave to their babies. This was before I had my own child, so I learned a lot from them. In poverty, in addiction, with a chronically compromised immune system, these moms loved their babies.

And perhaps most beautifully to me was that in every visit, no matter the situation, the nurses paid no mind or inserted no opinion about whether or not the mother should be a mother, whether or not the baby should have been brought into the world. That was a moot point in all of this. The work was in how we could provide the safety net for the baby that is here and how we could offer care and support to the woman who is now a mother.

It's worth noting that many of these young mothers were Black. It was in this setting that I really began to recognize the depth of systemic racism and, because I was in seminary at the time, that it became so clear to me that a commitment to the Gospel requires a commitment to racial equity. These same babies and mothers who we claimed as "Made in the Image of God" also faced inequities in everything from education to healthcare to economics to employment to social exclusion to the racist language we use to describe and judge their choices. Even with deep gratitude for the nonprofit I had the honor of serving, it became clear that a true commitment to walking in the way of Jesus involved a commitment to speaking out against the ways our society fails to truly repair generations of harm.

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Today we have a Gospel story from Matthew about a mother in desperate need of a safety net; in desperate need of a society that uplifts and protects her and her child. "My daughter is tormented by a demon," she comes pleading to Jesus. And he does something completely out of character. He does something completely contrary to everything we've seen Jesus do throughout the rest of the Gospels. He ignores her.

She pleads with him more and the Disciples are annoyed. They ask Jesus to make her go away, and he responds, “I didn’t come to save you. I came to save the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And those of us who are familiar with the Gospel, who understand this concept of extravagant welcome... who have seen Jesus heal the woman who touched the hem of his garment...who know that Jesus healed lepers, befriended tax collectors and prostitutes, washed the feet of his disciples... we are so confused. *Who is this?* It is just completely out of character for Jesus to turn someone away, and especially to tell someone that he has not come to save them because of their origin or ancestry... because she was not a part of the lost sheep of the house of Israel, because she was a Canaanite.

At the very beginning of the book of Matthew, this same Gospel, we see a very long genealogy. We read it during Advent sometimes; the genealogy of Jesus. My favorite thing to point out about that genealogy is that it includes in Jesus’ ancestry four women-- Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. They each pushed against the social expectations of the time in such a way that may have ended their lives, but as a result, the lineage from Abraham to Jesus continued-- I can tell you each of their stories if you’d like, but for right now I want to lift up a very intentional literary element here: we know that each of these four women were of Canaanite origin, right at the very beginning of the Gospel according to Matthew.

So here we have out of character Jesus, ignoring the voice of a desperate Canaanite mother because for a moment he sees himself as sent to save only the lost sheep of the house of Israel. She continues to plead, and Jesus responds, “it is not right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” and us, as

readers, we can’t help but gasp. Did Jesus Christ... Jesus of Nazareth... the Messiah... Child of Mary... Jesus whose table is big enough for everyone, everywhere, everytime... Did Jesus just compare this despairing mother to a dog?

But I love her because she’s tenacious... relentless... persistent, so stands tall and she looks Jesus straight in the eyes and she says, “Even the dogs get the crumbs from under the table.” “I’m a mama here to have my baby healed and I know you can heal her.” And Jesus is transformed back into the Jesus we follow. “Yes. Of course. Of course. Of course. Yes.” and she is healed. ---

What a cringey but beautiful Gospel story. It’s a story that reminds us that Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine. We see ourselves mirrored in Jesus’ initial response to this Mama, but it is not our best selves, and it is not Jesus’ best self. It’s humbling to know that Jesus Christ could get annoyed, because I would think most if not all of us have had this type of experience-- at our best we are compassionate people but there are just days when we don’t have the patience to deal with someone else’s problems. We have our own children, or family, or job, or personal health, to care for... our own problems to deal with, and we don’t have time to also take on the problems of others. We also just struggle so greatly to find the patience to deal with people whose problems are not our own problems. We are so quick to turn away people who do not think like us, or act like us, or maybe even people who do not look like us. And it is a comforting feeling when we can relate to Jesus.

But if we relate to Jesus in that human moment, then because of our commitment to the Gospel, and our commitment to occupy the overlap between the Kingdom of God and the world,

then we can't rest in that human moment. We have to listen to the persistence of the Canaanite mother as well. Her persistence will transform us just as it transformed the one in whose footsteps we walk, to move beyond our impatience and into grace.

I think we do have an unfortunate human tendency to choose who is and who is not worthy of our hospitality. It may be based on race or ethnicity, as it so unfortunately was with the Canaanite woman in this passage, and as it is so unfortunately so often in our world today. It may be based on economic class. It may be based on skill set or mental capacity, gender or sexuality, political or religious identity, family history or preconceived judgments, and we are very good at justifying our actions rather than admitting our prejudice.

But this woman persisted, and in her persistence Jesus remembered their common humanity. To be clear-- she shouldn't have to persist. She shouldn't have to insist on and fight for her right to be respected, acknowledged, deemed worthy. But in her persistence, Jesus finally saw her, he finally saw a woman who loved her child so deeply and would do whatever it took for her daughter to be healed.

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So this story goes that Jesus had an ugly response before he had a graceful one... very out of character for him... but it is also for us a playbook that when we have an ugly response, we have an opportunity to transform it and try again, to learn and to move on to grace and healing.

My experience with Nurses for Newborns was full of these moments where I had an ugly response in my mind before I had a graceful one. I had so little understanding of what these mothers had overcome, and what they had in front of them.

But these were tenacious mothers, persistent mothers, relentless mothers, as most mothers are, even when they shouldn't have to be... these were mothers whose humanity I could feel in their presence. I watched and learned as the nurses so easily passed up all judgement and any questions full of blame and shame, and instead settled into grace and compassion, asking what kind of safety net is needed right now, in this context, to raise a healthy baby? In these turbulent times, we should be asking what kind of society is needed right now, in this context, to raise healthy babies? This is the Gospel. You know the Thomas Merton quote by now: our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. I'll add to it the lesson that Jesus and I learned: Everyone, everyone, everyone is worthy of love and belonging. And what's amazing is that the moment we love them, the moment we look in those eyes and see the way we were each made in the image of God, worthiness is so certain and sure, and healing comes to us all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

## **Benediction**

Go forth from this place, even if you stay right where you are,  
doing the work of Christ in the world:

extend support to those in need,

speak up for those cast aside,

build bridges of reconciliation,

strengthen bonds of community,

knowing that you remain in the abiding presence of the

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all. Amen.

## **Postlude**

*Courante from Suite for Cello no. 2 in D minor*

by J.S. Bach, arr. Stevens

Tim Hampton, marimba