

The Gentle Side of God

When I was very young, I loved visiting my grandmother's house. She lived in an area which was much like Leominster. As a child, I loved playing with all of her things, and she let me! I remember a fantastic assortment of great and wonderful items – large wooden spoons and mixing bowls were turned into futuristic cities on the living room floor. A small mirror and comb became the solar collection station. An early transistor radio which didn't work was the power generating station. A hand powered egg beater was an important part of the infrastructure, its function now a mystery.

My grandmother also let me play with and read her books. I remember 1920's editions of *Tarzan of the Apes*, and *Readers Digest Condensed Books*. One volume was a dog eared Book of Common Prayer, with a depiction of The Good Shepherd carrying a baby sheep. I remembered that picture because in the Congregational Church where I grew up the single stained glass window depicted Jesus carrying a baby sheep.

Little lambs are cute and fragile, like newborn kittens and puppies. A shepherd who cares about his flock cares for the little ones as well. The shepherd carries the lambs when they are tired and weak. A shepherd cares for the sheep at his or her own peril, including the sheep who are old, weak, or are expecting young.

One of my favorite portions of scripture is the 23rd Psalm. I never get tired of it. Very early on faithful people realized that God is our shepherd. God's care is gentle and deep. Just like the relationship between a shepherd and the sheep, God knows where you are tired and weak. God knows when you are stressed to your breaking point. If you ask God to, God will lead you gently at those times. I'm sure that there are many times in your past that you felt as if you were completely alone, with nowhere else to turn. The truth is that God was always there, just as God is always there for you now. When you feel as if you can go no further, God will attend you if you open yourself to God's healing care.

When you face difficult situations, imagine God holding you in loving arms. Pray to God often, telling God of those things which frighten and worry you, and God will help to lift those things from you and lighten your load. God wants you to be on a safe and sure path, one which is in pastures green and "*beside still waters*" (Ps. 23:2). God wants you to trust in God's deep and care, no matter what you face. God wants you to drink deeply from the river of life, which will make all of the aspects of your life better and true. The tender side of God exists. Tap into it, and you will know that you are safe from harm, no matter what life brings.

Faithfully,

Rev. Keith

Moderator's Moment

January 23, 2012

As many of you know, I travel a lot with my work and I am writing this as I am travelling to California. I am listening to a podcast called the "Daily Audio Bible Podcast." I enjoy this podcast because the author reads the entire Bible over a period of 365 days. Today I was listening Daniel 5:1-31. These verses had to do with people forgetting to honor God and the importance of making sure we have God in the right place in our life. I am glad to be working in a church that is centered around honoring God!

We had a busy time during the Christmas season. A lot of people were involved in the many programs and services that all went off flawlessly. I was very honored to see a lot of visitors attend our church and they got to witness such wonderful services! I am very honored to be able to work in such a very active church with so many people dedication to spreading the Word of God!

I want to say that we had a lot of people stand up and fill in both in the church office and for our services. I especially want to thank Sandra DeRienzo who filled in and gave a wonderful sermon at the last minute the first Sunday in January.

By the time you read this, we will have had our annual meeting. I hope everyone will read our annual report that contains all of the reports of our active committees and our annual budget. We should all be thankful for all of the people who have worked so hard this past year to make our church a success. Our church has a tight budget so we are asking everyone to keep their pledges up to date. We also don't want people to forget about their Capital Campaign pledges and make sure they are up to date as well. There was a lot of necessary work done on our church roof in the last few months.

Lastly, we need to work to get more new people into our wonderful church. Please make a point to invite people to our church and say hello to anyone new you may see attending our services. We all need to work on spreading the Word and expanding our church.



Faithfully yours,

Charlie Milhans



Christian Education News



FEBRUARY



A word from the director

February is a season of Love. Please use your hands, feet and voices to share Gods love with everyone you know. Share Valentines, run errands for others and invite others to church where they can hear about God's love for all of us.

Children's Church Update

We just finished a rotation of the plagues. The rotational workshops really brings a lot of energy to children's church and are a great way for parents to get involved in our children's ministry. Please consider volunteering for our final workshop of the year in May.

One of my favorite things about the Spark curriculum is that it makes it easy for families that would like to continue with the lesson to do so, with the family pages that go home each week. If you miss a week you can go to pilgrimchurch-ucc.sparksundayschool.org. On the home page it lists the events for children's church. If you click on a lesson it will let you download the family page for that lesson.

Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper.

The CE committee will be sponsoring a pancake supper for Shrove Tuesday, February 21st at 5:30-7pm. The price will be \$6 for adults and \$4 for children, with a \$20 family cap. Tickets will be on sale the first three Sundays of Feb. Please bring your appetite and tune up your singing voice as we plan to have karaoke for the fun of all.

Contact Natalie Stassen at Natalie.stassen@verizon.net at anytime with questions or concerns about the Christian education program at Pilgrim Congregational Church where we believe the church teaches through all that it does.

Valentines Workshop

Once again we will do a Valentines Workshop the first weekend of February. The workshop is for those that have not yet taken First Communion. Please dress for crafts.

Confirmation Class

After much hard work fundraising, it is almost time for the Confirmands to go on their annual retreat. They will be going to Craigville the first weekend of March and then coming back for many church related events this spring before they are confirmed in May.

What is your talent?

Volunteers are needed to assist with classes, workshops and events throughout the year. Please prayerfully consider how you can best share your blessings with the children and fill out a volunteer form and return it to the CE office.

Please Register

Please take a few minutes to register yourself and your children at pilgrimchurch-ucc.sparksundayschool.org. If you have difficulty with the website please turn in a paper copy of your registration to the CE office. It is important that we update our files every year, especially for allergies and any changes in contact information.

FEBRUARY

BIRTHDAYS

- 2/2 Diana Itkowsky
David Kelly
Wendy Creamer
2/4 David DeCarolis
Lauren Brown
2/6 Donna Cormier
Ashley Keogh
2/7 Esther Bresnahan
Lorna Chabot
2/9 Johanna Elliot
Judith Rainey
2/11 Julie McDuffie
2/13 Roxanne Toomey
2/14 Bonnie Clifton
2/14 Evelyn Jiménez
2/16 Kevin Gallagher
2/17 Ruth Harnden
2/18 Brandon Thorne
2/19 Cindy Bataitis
2/20 Roberta Carlson
2/21 Elizabeth A. Raymond
2/28 William "Willy" Cousins
Dr. Natalie Stassen



During the month of February, the Board of Trustees will host Coffee Hours.

WELCOME ABOARD!

A warm welcome to *Ashley Keogh* who is now our Sunday Sexton. Charles is continuing his education in New Mexico and felt the commute would be too long!



Food Pantry

FOOD PANTRY

PILGRIM PANTRY REPORT FOR 2011

– Due to a miscommunication, a report about our food pantry was

omitted from the 2011 Annual Report. Since so many of you actively participate in this mission, we would like you to be aware that during the past year we distributed 241 bags of groceries. This is an increase of 50 bags from 2010. Not only have requests increased, but the cost of food in general has increased.

During the past year we also received non-perishables from Johnny Appleseed School, Vacation Bible school students, a local Girl Scout Troop, Temple Agudat Achim members, Northwest School students, Wilder Masonic Lodge members, and the Dwight family Christmas guests. All these donations, together with generous financial contributions, make it possible for us to fill and make available bags of groceries to folks in need of assistance. Thanks to all for helping this Mission's Committee community outreach to continue.

Each month we specify one or two non-perishables to help keep our cabinets stocked - in February we would appreciate *beef stew and/or tuna*. Other non-perishable items are always welcome. Please remember to check the expiration date.

Thank you and God Bless.

***Bev Stone, Martha Crane,
Nancy Hicks***



BOARD of DEACONS

DEACON OF THE WEEK

Feb. 5 Mary Mullahy
Communion by Intinction
Servers: Sandra DeRienzo, Bonnie Clifton
Ushering congregation forward:
Charlie Milhans and Mike Palis
Feb. 12 Charlie Milhans
Feb. 19 Bonnie Clifton
Feb. 26 Shaqim Walker

ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE

Feb. 22, 7:00 P.M.
Sandra DeRienzo, Deb and
Shaqim Walker



THANK YOU NOTES

I want to thank you so much for helping Samantha Wilkey and her baby October out at Christmas. Samantha is very handicapped and can't drive or do very much. So she has no way to go to church.

The baby was baptized there and it's wonderful that you helped even though I was a late caller. Hope to call earlier for next year's Holidays – Thanksgiving and Christmas. She is a single mom.

Mary Burchstead

Thank you for the wonderful Christmas gift and visit from the church member who delivered the gift. I really appreciate you thinking of me.
Esther Bresnahan

Dear Reverend Alderman,
We just wanted to say Thank You for all of your support with the passing of Jeff's dad. We appreciate your taking the time out of your busy schedule for us. We are truly grateful.
God Bless.
Jeff and Becky

Dear Reverend Alderman,
Thank you for your participation in the City of Leominster's 2012 Inaugural Ceremony and for delivering such a beautiful Benediction. I sincerely appreciate the time and effort you gave and I hope to coordinate more events with you in the future.
A Happy and Prosperous New Year to all!

Sincerely,
Dean J. Mazzarella
Mayor

SOUPER BOWL OF CARING

The Annual Souper Bowl of Caring will be held Sunday, February 5, 2012. The money and food donations will be donated to our PCC Food Pantry. Our Confirmation Class will be collecting at the narthex and at the entrance to the Sanctuary. Join the movement that is transforming Super Bowl weekend into the nation's largest celebration of giving and serving!
Thank you. *Missions Committee*





SAVE this date –
May 12, 2012 for
 Our Annual Church Fair
 "Spring In Bloom"
 8:00 A.M. – 2:00 P.M.

Our many Shoppes are preparing for this special date. You can have Breakfast or Lunch at our Café.

Start your spring cleaning now and save all the good stuff for the Yard Sale. Save all those gifts that you cannot use for our gift table, etc.

We will have our first Fair committee meeting February 12, 2012.

And this date - -



CORNED BEEF DINNER

Saturday, March 17th
 5:00-6:30 P.M. The
 Irish StepDancers will
 again perform for us at

5:45 P.M. More details in the coming weeks!

SENIOR CHOIR MEMBERS WANTED FOR THE EASTER SEASON

We would love to have additional members sing with us in the Senior Choir for the Easter Season. It would only involve six rehearsals starting on February 29th and ending on April 4th. Our plans include singing the wonderful Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah on Easter Sunday. If you have any questions, please call me at 978-537-

Easter Season



9278 or e-mail me at drjsamps@yahoo.com Looking forward to seeing many new faces.
 Musically yours, *Lucille Sampson*

LEOMINSTER MIDDLE SCHOOLS TO PERFORM THE MUSICAL "Grease"

We are so proud that we have five children from our congregation that will perform in the musical "Grease". It will be held the last weekend in March, so save the dates- March 30 and March 31. *Caroline Raymond* will be Sandy, *Olivia Wilson* will be Marty, and *Julia Davis, Katie Doyle* and *Emily Schaffter* will be in the Pink Posse.



PANCAKE SUPPER

SHROVE TUESDAY

The CE Committee will sponsor the annual Pancake Supper on Tuesday, Feb. 21st. Supper will be served from 5:30-6:30 p.m. Price is \$6 for adults, \$4 for children, with a family cap set at \$20. Tickets will be on sale the first three Sundays of February.

ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE OF SPIRITUAL HEALING

Rev. Keith will hold a service of spiritual healing on Wednesday evening, Feb. 22nd, at 7:00 P.M.

LENTEN BIBLE STUDY

Bible study will be held Tuesday evenings at 7:30 p.m. from Feb. 21-April 3, 2012. The Gospel according to Matthew will be the study topic. Please sign the sheet in Fellowship Hall if you plan to attend.

Women's Book Bash

February 26, 2012

With our February discussion of one of the best loved novels of the 20th Century, we join readers across the nation to participate in the **Big Read!** Our February selection celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel **To Kill a Mockingbird** by Harper Lee. The **Big Read** is a program of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest designed to bring communities together and encourage reading for enjoyment. The Leominster Public Library is one of 76 non-profit organizations nationwide which received a grant to promote and carry out a Big Read program in 2012. Copies of the book are available at the Leominster Public Library. You may pick them up yourself or ask Beth Lyle to get one for you.

We will meet at the home of Karen McNall, 267 Willard Street, Leominster, MA from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. on February 26, 2012 to share our thoughts and feelings with other women of the church. Call Beth Lyle at 978-537-6964 if you have any questions or need a ride.



To Kill a Mockingbird

By Harper Lee

"Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

A lawyer's advice to his children as he defends the real mockingbird of Harper Lee's classic novel --- a black man charged with the rape of a white girl. Through the young eyes of Scout and Jem Finch, Harper Lee explores with rich humor and unswerving honesty the irrationality of adult attitudes toward race and class in the Deep South of the 1930s. The conscience of a town steeped in prejudice, violence, and hypocrisy is pricked by the stamina and quiet heroism of one man's struggle for justice --- but the weight of history will only tolerate so much.

One of the best-loved classics of all time, **To Kill a Mockingbird** has earned many distinctions since its original publication in 1960. It has won the Pulitzer Prize, been translated into more than 40 languages, sold more than 40 million copies worldwide, and been made into an enormously popular movie. It was also named the best novel of the 20th century by librarians across the country.

Read Ahead:

Friendship Bread by Darien Gee

SCRIP and Hannaford orders due Feb. 12, 2012. If you are reading this electronically, please go to the newsletter page and scroll down to Shopping Cart and order form.

Do You Know.....Maria Joffrion?



I had the honor of co-hosting for MIHN this month with Maria. I had wanted to interview her and it worked out with a wonderful evening of girl talk.

Maria came with her family from Argentina to follow the "American Dream". They moved here when she was 8 years old and ended up in Westford where friends and family had located. The plan was to stay, but her father decided to go back and eventually so did her brother and sister. Her mom goes back as often as she is able to see her other grandchildren.

Maria had met John, who was a friend of her brother's, and after John served his time in the military, they married and started a family right away. John is in construction and Maria settled into being a full-time mom.

She had Ben, Lucia, Tommy, and Sean. She shared with me the trials they went through when Tommy had a difficult birth and was later diagnosed with NF. There were several complications with the birth and the discovery and confirmation of the diagnosis of NF was more than Maria wanted to deal with emotionally. She certainly was not prepared for what she and her husband, as well as her other children, would have to deal with to help Tommy handle his illness.

There are a lot of times she felt so alone and isolated. She has a few friends who have certainly stepped up to help, one of whom formed **Team Tommy**. They have raised monies to help defray medical expenses and support research for NF. I have to say that Maria is a very caring woman who has faced a lot of stress, trying times, and a lot of guilt about letting down her other children, BUT she has taken on this disease by educating herself and involving her other children in activities to support Tommy. She is amazing and I don't think she really realizes what a role model she is for her children. She was named one of the 10 most interesting people in the city of Leominster for the year 2011. She has shaved her hair to support cancer victims, she does a bone marrow donor drive that I hope everyone will consider signing up for, she does a polar plunge to help fight the disease, she has become very nutritionally aware of what is good for the body, plus doing all the other mom and wife stuff.

Maria found our church through Beth and Ben Ortega, and we are so grateful to them for bringing her into our church family!

I feel very blessed to have been able to spend that time with her, and I sincerely hope that all of you make the effort to get to know her and support her when she needs us. I know it's hard for her to ask for help sometimes, so we need to be pro-active. Tommy has a long road ahead of him and that means Maria does as well. This is an amazing family!

by Bonnie Clifton

PROMOTE YOUR BUSINESS IN THE MESSENGER

Pilgrim Congregational Church invites members and friends to advertise your business in our monthly newsletter. The cost is \$25.00 per calendar quarter. Simply submit a business card or equivalent-size notice to the church office, along with payment, for however many quarters you'd like the ad to run. This is a wonderful opportunity to promote your business while contributing financially to our church.

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difficult. So as you prepare for Lent, carry with you the hope made possible by Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf.

—Based on the “Journey to Hope” sermon series, www.rethinkchurch.org/lent

Wayside shrines

Along European and Latin American roads, especially in Catholic countries, it's common to encounter sculptures of Jesus, Mary or another religious image, often set within a little shelter. People have erected these wayside shrines for centuries to mark an important event's location, indicate a parish boundary or help a traveler find the way. They may be at crossroads, on hilltops or along stretches of open road. The shrines allow travelers to pause, offer prayers and turn heart and mind to God.

What places in your life serve as wayside shrines, encouraging you to turn to God? For many Christians, weekly worship is such a place. Daily devotional reading might be a wayside shrine for you. Could the “empty” time not of your choosing, between jobs or other life experiences, be a wayside shrine, inviting you to step off the road and rest, pray and listen to God? When you take up your journey again, heart refreshed, remember that God always walks with you.

Special dates

- African-American History Month
- Boy Scout Sunday, February 5, 2012
- Valentine's Day, February 14, 2012
- Transfiguration of Our Lord, February 19, 2012
- Presidents Day, February 20, 2012
- Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2012
- First Sunday in Lent, February 26, 2012

• “To love another person is to see the face of God.”
—Lyrics from *Les Misérables*, Claude-Michel Schönberg

Pack well



During Lent, as we focus on Christ's journey to the cross, let's also examine the journey of our lives. The first task when leaving on any adventure is packing.

What have you placed in your bag? Are you weighed down with temptations, self-doubt, money worries, relationship troubles? Have you overlooked any important items? Maybe your bag feels too empty for the challenges ahead. Remember to pack mercy, grace and forgiveness.

Thanks to Easter, we know that our journey in Christ continues, even when the road becomes

• “If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant; if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome.”
—Anne Bradstreet

• “Faith is a knowledge within the heart, beyond the reach of proof.”
—Kahlil Gibran

+ Christian Symbols +



40

This number appears many times in Scripture, often indicating a time of trial or testing, or simply marking something significant. It rained 40 days and nights during the Great Flood. Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Jesus fasted for 40 days and was with the disciples for 40 days between his resurrection and ascension. Taking this symbolic number to heart, the Christian church has long observed 40 days of Lent (not counting Sundays).

“O Love That Will Not Let Me Go”

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

George Matheson (1842-1906) wrote the words to this much-loved hymn while feeling intensely lonely and afraid.

Years back, his fiancé had broken their engagement upon learning he was going blind. Despite that challenge, Matheson had followed God’s call to a fruitful pastoral ministry — with his sister’s assistance. Now his sister was getting

married, and Matheson worried about who would take care of him and if anyone would ever want to marry him.

Amid such despair, Matheson later shared, God gave him all four verses of this hymn in five minutes. It’s a poignant reminder that God’s love sustains us even when human love falls short.

Transfiguration

All over this magnificent world, God calls us to extend his kingdom of shalom-peace and wholeness — of justice, of goodness, of compassion, of caring, of sharing, of laughter, of joy, of reconciliation. God is transfiguring the world right this very moment through us because God believes in us and because God loves us.

What can separate us from the love of God? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And as we share God’s love with our brothers and sisters, God’s other children, there is no tyrant who can resist us, no opposition that cannot be ended, no hunger that cannot be fed, no wound that cannot be healed, no hatred that cannot be turned into love, no dream that cannot be fulfilled.

—Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream*

Learning from Peter’s mistakes

In Mark 9:2-10, Jesus takes three disciples up a mountain, where his clothes become dazzling white and Moses and Elijah speak with him. Terrified, Peter starts babbling. He offers to construct three “dwellings” — presumably, worship structures. But Peter makes two common mistakes.

First, he fails to treat Jesus as the unique object of worship. Just as Peter would have worshiped Moses and Elijah alongside Jesus, we sometimes act as though money, work, another person or even church and Scripture are coequal with Christ. Obviously, family and friends are important, but Jesus is the only Son of God. The church and the Bible, though worthy of devotion, are only vehicles that bring us to Christ.

Second, Peter would have stayed on that mountain indefinitely. Spiritual highs are tempting that way. We resist going back “down” to daily life.

Ecstatic glimpses of Jesus' glory are one way God strengthens us to continue serving in Christ's name.

St. Valentine's sacrifice

Every February 14, we celebrate the loved ones in our lives with cards, flowers and chocolate. But Valentine's Day has another meaning that's been lost.

First declared a holiday by King Henry VIII of England in 1537, it commemorates the beheading of St. Valentine on February 14, 270 A.D. His crime? Performing wedding ceremonies after Roman Emperor Claudius II had outlawed marriage.

Valentine was martyred for faithfully doing the work God had given him. Although it's good to celebrate love and marriage, let's also remember the courage of a man who gave his life following his convictions.

Disability awareness

A friend tearfully shared how an usher asked her to leave a church service because of her squirmy toddler. But the boy wasn't just having a bad morning; he was born with a genetic disorder called Fragile X, which makes it nearly impossible to sit quietly.

It was nearly a year before that mother attended a church again. Then she found one with a shepherd program, where trained volunteers help children with special needs participate in worship, Sunday school and church activities.

As we look for ways to reach out to people with disabilities, remember that God's love has no limits. How can we, as God's church, reflect that love?

Refocus for Lent

Give up complaining — focus on gratitude.
Give up harsh judgments — think kind thoughts.

Give up worry — trust God to provide.
Give up discouragement — be full of hope.
Give up bitterness — turn to forgiveness.
Give up hatred — return good for evil.

Give up anger — be more patient.
Give up pettiness — become mature.
Give up jealousy — pray for trust.
Give up gossiping — control your tongue.
Give up sin — turn to virtue.
Give up giving up — persevere.

—Author unknown

Old enough to serve

In a worship committee meeting, much debate occurred about the minimum age for acolytes. "If kids can't reach the pulpit to place the Bible, then they shouldn't be allowed to carry it," some said. Others complained that young participants didn't carry the cross straight enough or that their childish delight seemed irreverent.

The conversation seemed to overshadow the central question: "Who gets to serve?" Does God's calling have limits? Shouldn't our faithful, joyful hearts, not our talents or abilities, define the quality of our service?

Perhaps we can learn from the child standing eagerly in the back of the sanctuary, clutching a Bible to his chest and asking, "I help God?" I don't want to be the one to tell him no.

Bible Quiz

During Jesus' time in the wilderness after his baptism, Satan tempted him to do three things. Which of the following was not one of the temptations?

- A. To change water into wine so wedding guests would know he was God's Son
- B. To throw himself down from the top of the temple, expecting angels to save him
- C. To turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger
- D. To worship Satan in order to gain all the world's kingdoms

Answer: A (See Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13.)



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Walking with God

The essence of the Christian life is knowing God and walking with him. It's about sticking with him when the sky is blue and also when it's filled with clouds or choked with smoke. It's about walking with the Lord through thick and thin, and pressing on through every heartache and trial that happens to come our way.

—Greg Laurie

Pronoun shift

Society encourages us to focus on ourselves. The pronouns in the parable of the rich man indicate that he fell into this trap, too: “He talked to himself: ‘What can I do? My barn isn’t big enough for this harvest. ... I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll gather in all my grain and goods, and I’ll say to myself, Self, you’ve done well!’” (Luke 12:16-19, The Message).

What a difference other pronouns would have made. The man could have asked, “What would you have me do, God?” He could have seen things as God’s, on loan to him to share with others: “This barn you’ve blessed me with, God, isn’t big enough for this harvest you’ve provided. I’ll share the extra with others, as you’ve commanded.”

And instead of taking credit himself, he could have offered praise: “God, you’ve cared so well for me. Thank you, Lord!”