



# FIRST CHURCH

## CHATTER

August, 2020

This is another edition of our church newsletter. We thank those members and friends who have contributed stories, biographies, reflections, letters, poems and encourage any who wish to contribute to our church newsletter. As you can read in this edition, we have many talented friends and church members. We would like to get to know all of you better and encourage you to send your thoughts, poems, stories to us to publish. Thanks so much.

The newsletter will be printed at the beginning of each month and be sent via email to church members and friends, be sent by mail to those who would prefer a written copy and be available in the foyer for all to pick up when the church is reopened. In the meantime, we will deliver the Chatter to those who would prefer paper copy or don't receive email.

**We are always looking for stories, poems, thoughts to contribute. Please send to Anne Short or Jody Green for future editions.**

This month's edition highlights several of the sermons which our First Church friends have sent to us for publication.

Our new interim minister Rev. Mark Seifried has joined us this week and we welcome him with open arms and gratitude for joining our congregation to help us during this transition. By the time this Chatter is published, you might have joined him in a zoom Happy Hour and had a chance to welcome him yourselves.

We also want to tearfully say goodbye to our seminary student, Rachel Payne (as Margaret McComish said so emotionally at church service August 9<sup>th</sup>) who is heading back to Boston to continue her Divinity Studies. We all feel so blessed to have had her in our presence this summer and wish her good health and safety, peace and success.

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Dear Church,

*Four months ago, I had no intent of leaving Boston. And then a colleague told me to consider sending my profile to First Church in Williamstown. She remarked that y'all were "woke," actively practicing the faith of Jesus. So I did. And here I am, with heart and eyes wide open.*

*"Thank you" is not an adequate response to my sense of gratitude and wonder at the extravagant welcome you have given me. Baked goods, flowers, herbs, fruits and veggies from your gardens, jams, gift and greeting cards, and a wonderful book all helped me awaken to the fact that I am beyond blessed to be entering this transitional time as your pastor. I can't wait to see what kind of trouble we can muster together – to the glory of God.*

*Grace upon grace,  
Pastor Mark Seifried*

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### **Seth Wax, Sermon on July 9, 2020**

#### Rabbi Seth's Background:

Rabbi Seth Wax is the Jewish Chaplain at Williams College.

Rabbi Seth grew up in the Boston area and has been on a search that has brought him through synagogues and Buddhist monasteries to divinity school and rabbinical school before coming to Williams College in the summer of 2017. He has a special interest in exploring how to live a meaningful, engaged life that is infused with learning, contemplation, community, and deep interfaith engagement.

Before coming to Williams, he was the rabbi at Congregation Mount Sinai in Brooklyn Heights, NY. Say hi when you see him on campus, shoot him an email to meet for coffee, or just stop by his office to see if his super-friendly dog Ruby is in! A graduate of the Hebrew College Rabbinical School (Newton,

MA) and Harvard Divinity School, he has an interest in Jewish mysticism and Buddhist contemplative theory. ([Williams College Chaplains](#))

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#### Rabbi Seth's Sermon:

*"In my work as Jewish Chaplain at Williams College, I have the privilege of working with talented and inquisitive students, who so often are driven by a deep passion for learning and seek to make their mark on our world. Yet often, when my path crosses that of a student, they are in a place of crisis, or in a moment of searching. Lost on the path, they don't know which way to turn. Tools and ways of being that they had used in the past no longer serve them.*

*"Recently I thought of one student who came to me during her second year at the college. We met on the lawn, just outside the walls of First Congo, on a bright and sunny day. I had met her briefly during her first year, and at the time, she came across as confident, determined, and bright. But when I encountered her on that warm day, she looked hesitant, uncertain. As our conversation unfolded, she talked about changes in her life. She recently had a falling out with friends she had become close with in her first year of school. She had an increasing sense of not knowing what she wanted to do with her life. Although she arrived with a sense of conviction about her major and professional*

*direction – English major with a pre-med concentration – low grades left her feeling directionless. She also felt increasingly distant from her upbringing. She began doubting the religion her parents raised her with. But more unsettling for her, was that she did not know where to turn for guidance, and she did not know how to be open to it. As a child and teenager, whenever she had a question about what to believe, or who she was, she could turn to her parents, her church, or her school, and they would tell her, and she would receive the information. Now, she wanted to figure things out for herself, but she also wanted guidance. Not someone to tell her what to think, but for a person or some presence to help her see what she needed to see next in her own development, that would help her grow in her life journey. Yet she was afraid that even if that guidance did come, she would not be open to it or would miss the signal.*

*“I suspect that we all encounter this challenge – of seeking guidance and trying to be open to it. So often, we find ourselves in deep need of guidance, and we often have difficulty being open to it when we need it most. When need to make a change in our professional lives. When we lose a job or a family member. When we feel that we have lost our way. When we stand at the crossroads of a major transition, either personally or as a community. When we try to discern how to respond wholeheartedly and effectively to the depth of racial injustice that we are embedded in. In times such as these, we yearn for guidance. We seek a new possibility, openness, for some way to see out of our current predicament, to bring healing to our world.*

*“But it can be a real struggle to be open to that guidance. We live in a society that encourages, trains us not to rely on others, to be skeptical of others, to figure it out for ourselves. And often, we are not in a place where we can hear the guidance. When guidance is offered, we do not often hear it. We are too often caught up in our own stories, in fixed ideas about who we are and what we are capable of. So that when guidance appears in our lives, it becomes difficult for us to truly hear it, to let enter our lives and let it guide us to where we need to be.*

*“Which brings us to our biblical reading for today. As Margy read for us so beautifully, today we encounter the beginning of the story of Joseph.*

*Joseph is the favorite of Jacob’s 11 children, and he is the recipient of a coat that Jacob gives him as a sign of favor. This favor makes Joseph’s brothers hate him. According to the ancient rabbis, Joseph was also vain and self-centered, a trait that did not ingratiate him to his family. He was very much a spoiled child, a kid who thought he was at the center of his family and had dreams that confirmed his fantasy, as if the sun, moon, and stars all bowed to him. But above all, Joseph was stuck, caught in patterns that kept him from growing into the person that he needed to become.*

*“In our story today, Joseph’s brothers have taken the family sheep far to the north, to the area of Shechem, or modern-day Nablus. The patriarch Jacob calls to Joseph and sends him to check in on his brothers and the sheep. As we heard this morning, as soon as the brothers spot Joseph from afar, they plot to kill him. After some deliberation, they think better of it, and instead sell Joseph as a slave to a group of traveling merchants, and Joseph begins the long journey down into Egypt.*

*“There is one part of the story, almost imperceptible in its simplicity, that I would like to explore with you this morning. And that is how Joseph finds his brothers. When Joseph approaches the area where he expects to find his brothers, we read in the Hebrew,*

*וַיִּמְצֵא הָאִישׁ יֹשֵׁת הַתְּהוֹמֹת הַבְּשֵׁה הַיִּשְׂרָאֵל הוּא יֹשֵׁת לְמֹרֶה-תְּבַקֵּשׁ:*

*“A man finds Joseph wandering in the field. And he asks him, “What are you seeking? What are you searching for?”*

*“Joseph is wandering around. He has spent days looking for his brothers. He has no idea where they are, so he has been wandering here and there. Walking alone for days, he is left with his thoughts, ruminating on why he can’t find his brothers, perhaps asking himself why his brothers dislike him, even wondering what he is even doing there in a field, looking for them. Maybe he does not want to find them, and he thinks that if he keeps walking in circles, he can go back and tell his father that he tried his best but could not find them.*

*“But then a stranger appears. The biblical text tells us only that he is an “ish,” which is the Hebrew*

*word for man. This man has no name, no distinguishing features. We don't know where he comes from. This unnamed man appears at the very moment when Joseph is lost, vulnerable, and confused. And he asks Joseph, "What are you searching for?"*

*"Joseph pauses. I imagine that somehow, Joseph is caught off guard. He is ready to say that he searches for his brothers, but somehow, the look in the stranger's face, the way the question was asked, the question lands differently for him, and I imagine Joseph asking himself, "What am I searching for? What am I really looking for? Where am I really going?"*

*"How beautifully does the stranger's one question so wonderfully capture the essential question of being human, "what are you searching for?" When someone asks it of us, or when we ask it of ourselves, are we able to answer it? And as we begin to respond, what new opportunities and possibilities does it open for us?"*

*"Prior to this moment, Joseph thought he would simply go out to find his brothers, find out how the sheep were, and then head back home to his father Jacob. To continue his life as he had been living it, the favored one in the family, dreaming, thinking he was the center of the world. But when he hears the question, and he finally replies, Joseph says, "I'm looking for my brothers. Have you seen where they have been grazing sheep?" The stranger replies, "I heard them saying they were heading to Dothan. Go there." And with that, Joseph really hears the guidance from the stranger. He could have gone back home to his father Jacob, knowing that his brothers were in Dothan. But instead, he follows the guidance, and his life unfolds in a completely different way than he expects. Upon leaving the stranger's presence, Joseph heads toward his brothers and walks into a future in which he will be sold into slavery and then sent to Egypt. He will work for an official in Pharaoh's court but will then be falsely accused of attacking his owner's wife. He will languish in prison for years.*

*"Then, as the story of his life proceeds, he will be reborn. Joseph will become an interpreter of dreams to the Pharaoh, and become chief adviser to him. He will rule at just the time that his brothers come looking for food in the country that he helps to*

*rule. He will walk this path because of a question from a nameless stranger, a guide who appears momentarily in his life. Because Joseph is open to the guidance, it changes everything.*

*"Our story this morning invites us to ask ourselves, when have we been open to guidance in our lives? When has guidance come to each one of us? What are the times when we struggled in our life, not knowing where to turn or which way to go, and then a nameless person, or a close friend or family member says just the right thing or asks just the right question, and then suddenly, everything changes. We have clarity. A person shows up in our life, and as a result, we have new insight on a difficult conversation we need to have or what challenging step we must take. Or a new opportunity emerges. Or perhaps we gain just a bit more insight into a problem we are facing.*

*"The story of Joseph and the nameless man shines a light on those moments in our lives when we need guidance, when we receive it, and then we act on it. It's about the possibility of meeting someone or encountering a teaching, or having an experience, or getting some new information, and then everything changes, and we step into uncertainty.*

*"A new direction is opened up for us, and we are invited to walk on a new path, one of challenges, of new possibilities. We just have to allow ourselves to be guided, just like Joseph, and to follow that guidance, even if we don't know where it comes from.*

*"You know, in Jewish sources, there is a debate about who this nameless man is. Most traditional commentators say that the man was an angel. A divine being that God sent to make sure that in the midst of his wandering, Joseph would move in the direction that he was meant to go. Others, however, suggest that he was just a man. But even though he was a mortal, the man had been placed there by God, too. Which I think offers an important lesson for us: the guides that we encounter may or may not be angels, but they still serve a divine function. A guide can be anyone who helps us get to where we are supposed to be. We may never know if the guides in our lives are angelic or human. But each being, including each of us, can be a guide, channeling divine guidance.*



*“We live in such troubled times. We need guidance more than ever. Our shared religious traditions suggest that just as God is always speaking, guidance and wisdom from the divine is available at all times, helping each of us. That we are at all times being offered guidance and that we are surrounded by guides. We don’t always know who they are. They could be the nameless stranger, but it could also be the good friend, the bank teller, our partner, or our child or grandchild. Or the new interim pastor who will accompany you through the process of discernment as you choose a new settled pastor. The key teaching of this week’s reading is to be open to guidance. To be aware that the journey is not always straight or without challenge, but that we are being guided. To become better people, to live with more open-heartedness and love, to seek justice. And to do that effectively, we need to tune our eyes and our ears and our hearts to the guidance that is coming to us. I want to bless each of us to be open to all the guidance that we receive, and to allow it to deeply touch and transform our lives.”*

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#### Mac Bellner's Background:



Mac Bellner’s work career was spent in various modes of public social work and higher education service-learning. She is a graduate of Christian Theological Seminary, with dual MAs in Divinity and Theological Studies, and is ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Mac has two sons, a daughter, and three grandchildren (who caused her move to the Berkshires in 2017). She

offers supply preaching for congregations here and in Indiana.

Mac also is a professional performer of folk music, focusing on traditional style music of Ireland, Scotland, England, and North America. She was born in a four room, tin roofed, clapboard house on a cotton farm in Louisiana and grew up in Mississippi and west Texas, cutting her musical teeth on Stamps-Baxter gospel and spiritual music as well as classic juke box country music. But she discovered her main musical niche in folk music, and describes herself as a Song-Saver of traditional folk music. She performed for 3 decades with Hogeye Navvy, a Celtic/North American folk band, with whom she has released 9 albums. Mac also was a Teaching Artist with Arts For Learning of Indiana (Young Audiences) as part of the May Apple duo for 30 years. In addition to touring in Ireland and Scotland with Hogeye Navvy, Mac has performed throughout the United States, in England, and in South Africa.

In addition, Mac is a teacher/caller for traditional American barn dance, English country dance, and Irish and Scottish ceilidh dance, as well as a director of plays in community theater, including the WLS National Barn Dance Re-Creation Show for the Indiana State Fair, Pioneer Village, for many years.

#### Mac Bellner's Sermon, “The Seed of Forgiveness”:

*“Will you join me as I pray the prayer of Brother Lawrence?”:*

*'Oh, God, since you are with me and I must now, in obedience to you, apply my mind to these outward things, I ask you to grant me the grace to continue in your presence, prosper me with your assistance, receive all my work, and possess all my affections."*

*'And let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable unto you, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Ps 19)'*

*“The sermon focus today is on the scripture passage from Acts. It’s listed as Acts 7:55-60, but there is no way to get the full benefit of this story of Stephen, known as the first Christian martyr, without reading the whole story. Stephen is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, so his story is told in its entirety in the 6th and 7th chapters of Acts. But that is too much to read today, so I am suggesting that you take some time this week to read the story of*

*Stephen. Right now, I will say that he was not Jewish, but was a follower of Jesus. He was among those Gentiles called "God-fearers" in this earliest version of the church, and was a Deacon in the congregation, and generally in no position to lead or speak. At that time, deacons were those who served the congregation and, basically, were to be seen and not heard. Aren't we glad that times have changed! Imagine what a fix we'd be in today if our deacons were not the leaders we need them to be! We are grateful for the leadership of our deacons, but the early church was not. And Stephen got in trouble. You should read those two chapters to learn about that.*

*"My focus today is on only one verse in these entire two chapters, the very last one. In verse 60, we are told that, as he was dying, murdered by the very leaders of the congregation he served, Stephen "knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died."*

*"As he was dying at the hands of these people, his last thought was about forgiveness. It seems impossible, unthinkable, that a person in the throes of being murdered could be thinking about forgiving those who perpetrated this terrible thing. Yet, here it is, and there may be two main reasons for the inclusion of Stephen's story in Acts. One is that, Luke says, the person holding the outer coat of Stephen while he was being killed was the person who later became Paul the Apostle, and that's a good enough reason to include the story. But I think the more important reason is this very example Stephen set for the vital power of forgiveness.*

*"(Knocking sound) That was the sound we heard waking us in the middle of the night. My husband was the pastor of Dallasburg Baptist Church in Wheatley Kentucky, population 68. Actually, within a 5 mile radius of the town, we had quite a bit larger population. The church was sort of the focal point of the little town, and we were a young couple, newly pastoring while my husband was still in seminary. During the first year there, we had gotten to know Buell and Mrs. Abbott. We and everybody else called them Buell and Miz Abbott. I don't think any of us even knew her first name! Buell had retired from work as a farm hand and they lived in a house just up the hill from the church parsonage. Every morning at the crack of dawn I*

*was awakened by Buell out chopping wood for their cook stove. As he chopped, he sang. It was at the top of his voice and it was, every morning, the same song, Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine! He sang it just as if he really was experiencing a foretaste of glory divine.*

*"We got to know Buell and Miz Abbott and would spend an occasional evening at their home for supper. After the meal, the radio would be turned on and we would listen to their beloved radio evangelists. I grew up in the deep south so radio preachers were well known to me, especially Brother Al, that's A.L., coming to you from Del Rio Texas, who sold threads from Jesus' burial shroud, prayer cloths, and the Holy Ghost String. Miz Abbott had a Holy Ghost String tied around a framed photo of their daughter, her husband, and five children on the sideboard. She believed Brother Al's word that the Holy Ghost String guaranteed no harm would ever befall anyone in a photo that the string encircled. If harm did befall them, they would not be badly hurt; if they were badly hurt, they would not die; but if they died, they would go to heaven.*

*"Now, all of my life I had thought disdainfully about radio preachers, and how they only took advantage of people, but as I watched the Abbots in their evening worship, singing along with the gospel songs and listening to the preachers talk about how God loves them and, yes, then trying to sell them various tokens to remind them of God's love, I came to realize how this was an important part of the Abbots' Christian experience. The preachers talked about forgiveness - a lot about forgiveness. Many of them were men who had been in prison and some had done terrible things, but had turned their lives over to God because they, themselves, had been forgiven for whatever were their crimes. So they, in turn, preached constantly about the availability of forgiveness. And not just God's forgiveness for yourself, but the need and the ability to forgive others for whatever wrongs were done. These evangelists preached the power of forgiveness. And that was a seed that was planted in the hearts of Buell and Miz Abbott.*

*"And so, when we heard that insistent knocking on our door in the middle of the night, we went downstairs to find Buell at the door. He said, "Pastor, my son-in-law got drunk and he's done shot and killed my daughter. He's in the jail at Owenton.*

*Miz Abbott has already gone to get them 5 little kids, and you and me have got to get to that jail. We've got to tell that boy that Jesus loves him and that we love him."*

*"I remember sitting in the living room for hours waiting for my husband to return and marveling at that kind of love. The seed of forgiveness was planted so deeply, and nurtured by such love, and I had never seen anything like it.*

*"In this pandemic situation in which we find ourselves today, I am aware of people who are reaching out, making contact with people they have known for years but have not seen or heard from in a long time. Sometimes these contacts have good results, sometimes not. I read in Dear Abby the other day where a woman said she called a long lost friend and was chagrined to learn the friend still harbored resentment about a long-past incident. The woman asked if Abby thought she should apologize or just let the woman go from her life. Abby's advice was, essentially, that if you have an opportunity to ask for or offer forgiveness, it's best for both of you that you do so.*

*"Now, there are things happening today that make me angry. Many times, my first thought is not about love, let alone forgiveness. But I am reminded that if we are truly to weather these times, and come out the better for them, our response must include forgiveness.*

*"Maybe this is a time to use our meditative moments to consider how we may need God's forgiveness. God freely offers it, but how often do we think in terms of our own on-going need for God's forgiveness.*

*"Maybe this is a time to look through our address book and think of those with whom we've lost contact. Perhaps there was that small incident, something that drove a wedge between us, and that now could be a hurt mended by calling and saying either, "Will you forgive me?" or I forgive you."*

*"Just setting the example may have consequences we could not even imagine. It may be that Saul who became Paul, standing to the side and hearing this dying man ask God to forgive those who killed him, took that seed within himself and let it grow so that when he later encountered Jesus, he*

*was ready to seek forgiveness and change his life of hatred for a life of love forever."*

*"Ah, I'm out of time or I would share a story about my younger son and myself, but I do want to tell you how the story ended for Buell and Miz Abbott. Their son-in-law went to prison for manslaughter, a 10-20 year sentence. The Abbotts raised their five grandchildren. Every single month for 10 years they went to the prison with the children to visit their father. Buell and Miz Abbott forgave their son-in-law and loved him back home. When he was released on parole after ten years, he came home to them.*

*"In the book Works of Love, by one of my favorite theologians, the one I call the Reluctant Theologian, Soren Kierkegaard writes about forgiveness as being so intricately connected with what he calls neighbor love, that forgiveness cannot happen without the presence of love. The seed of forgiveness grows in the fertile soil of love. And that is what Buell and Miz Abbott understood so well.*

*"Amen"*

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*These are the August Birthdays of our church friends. If you see one of these folks, please wish them a "Happy Birthday" If we have missed your birthday in August and any upcoming month, let Anne Short know and you will be acknowledged.*

## **AUGUST BIRTHDAYS**

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|---------------|--|
| <b>August</b> | <b>2. Sam Humes</b>                    |
|               | <b>3. Arlene Kirsch</b>                |
|               | <b>5. Adrian Dunn, Faith McClellan</b> |
|               | <b>19. Trevor Murphy</b>               |
|               | <b>22. Barbara Hadden</b>              |
|               | <b>24. Annie Parkman,</b>              |
|               | <b>24. Aguee Penalzoa</b>              |
|               | <b>26. Lyn Rork</b>                    |

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Susan Yates writes:

I wanted to share the story of the masks that I donated to the church.

I didn't make them all. I purchased them in bulk from Berkshire Seamsters.

The Seamsters are a network of four dozen Berkshire County residents working out of their homes to produce masks that conform to guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control that can be wholesaled to local agencies or retailed at more than a dozen locations throughout the county.

The group sells the reusable, machine washable masks to retail venues as well as to groups or individuals.

95% of the cost of the masks goes directly back to the workers who are doing the sewing.

If anyone is interested in purchasing masks. Contact Team Leader Maria Arias 413-358-3515  
[Ariasmariam75@gmail.com](mailto:Ariasmariam75@gmail.com)

Thanks. Susan Y