

An Update on Our Church Life in the Time of COVID

Dear Beloved in Christ,

Remember when we thought the COVID pandemic would last just a few weeks? Then a few months? Here we are, more than a year and millions of lives later, and while some things have improved – thank God for the gifted scientists and medical professionals that have brought us a vaccine which works to protect the majority of folks from the worst ravages of infection – some haven't. We pray especially for the people of India, where the disease is raging out of control. And we pray for our own communities as we come to terms with the fact that we won't be going back to the way things were but instead finding a new normal that we can live with, literally. I give thanks that even as God is here in the present comforting the afflicted and caring for the caregivers, God is also there in the unfolding future, already at work making a new home for us, God's pilgrim people.

I give thanks also for the inspired leaders of our congregation, members of the Boards of Deacons and Directors and our COVID Advisory Team and so many others, official and unofficial leaders, who have helped us plot a course through these uncharted waters. In the midst of... everything... it's good to remember that none of us has ever lived through anything like this. I certainly didn't take a course in Pandemic Planning in seminary. But with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and your support, the members and friends of the church, we have found a way not around or over but through, that has enabled our congregation not only to survive but even thrive.

While Zoom church is not anyone's first choice for how to gather, we have made the best of it, literally, and our commitment to worship, fellowship, education, even music and mission has deepened as a result. We've even discovered new elements of all these remote experiences we want to make sure to take with us into the future, like holiday flower deliveries, commute-less committee meetings, our richer prayer time, and a more intentional program of mutual care.

I am convinced that the key to all this was and continues to be our commitment not just to following the unfolding science but to centering our concern for the most vulnerable among us. In this, we are following the example of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, who recognizes the relative safety of the 99 and chooses

to pursue the welfare of the one at risk. It was in this spirit that we made the decision from the beginning to keep our worship and other core church activities 100% remote until we were able to offer comparably lively and life-giving experiences both online and in-person. While it's true that a very, very small number of folks could have been worshiping safely indoors long ago, that decision would have left the vast majority outside looking in, watching but not actively participating. As counterintuitive as it may sound, I believe our congregation has benefited immensely from this decision to remain outside the building together.

Now things are getting ready to change again, and that same ethos will guide us going forward. It's not that the science has changed so drastically, though our understanding certainly has grown. It's not just the advent of the vaccines, because though many of our number have received the vaccine already, children and youth and those with precluding medical conditions are not able to be vaccinated at this point, and we want to continue to center their needs and privacy. But all the equipment necessary to conduct fully hybrid worship simultaneously online and yes, in-person in the sanctuary, are on order and on their way and should be installed sometime in June.

To help us all prepare for this new reality, the Deacons and Directors, the COVID Advisory Team, and Rev. Maddie and I want to offer this preview of the protocols we will be using to help safeguard everyone's health:

- We will continue to abide by state guidelines for maximum seating inside to maintain safer social distance. At present that means no more than 30 people may attend any event in the sanctuary.
- You will need to pre-register for these in-person seats via Sign-Up Genius or a phone call to the office in the week prior to worship. No walk-ins will be admitted.
- All access to the building will be through the parking lot door nearest the office. If you or someone in your party needs to use the ramp, please let us know ahead of time, and we'll be happy to arrange that.
- Volunteer "health advocates" (please let us know if you'd like to volunteer!) will ask these CDC- and state-recommended screening questions before admitting anyone to the building:

1. Have you experienced any of the following

Continued on pg 2

symptoms in the past 48 hours: fever or chills; cough; shortness of breath or difficulty breathing; fatigue; muscle or body aches; headache; new loss of taste or smell; sore throat; congestion or runny nose; nausea or vomiting; diarrhea?

2. Are you or a household member currently isolating or quarantining because of a positive COVID test?
 3. Have you been in close physical contact in the last 14 days with anyone who is known to have laboratory-confirmed COVID or anyone who has any symptoms consistent with COVID?
 4. Are you currently awaiting the results of a COVID test?
 5. Have you or a household member traveled out of state in the past 10 days without either being fully vaccinated or without testing negative by PCR test within 72 hours of returning?
- You will need to wear an ASTM Level 3 mask (the sort used by health professionals), which we will provide, at all times while in the building. ***Removing your mask at any time while in the building will result in your being asked to replace it at once. Failure to do so will result in the immediate end of the event.
 - All seating in the sanctuary will be preassigned and may not be moved. Families will be seated together.
 - Bathrooms in the church building will not be available.
 - At the conclusion of the event, those in attendance will be dismissed in an orderly fashion to the parking lot.

Additionally, since our new audio-visual equipment will be installed in the sanctuary, in-person worship over the summer will take place there and not in the chapel. Singing in-person is still off-limits, but we will continue to be blessed by recorded singing and the addition of in-person instrumentalists. Our children and youth programming will remain remote or outdoor. Unvaccinated young people who travel out of state with their families will need to forego these in-person gatherings until after 10 days or a negative COVID test following their return. In addition, we will continue to work to create safer outdoor and in-person activities to enrich our life together, events like the recent organ recital, last fall's Trunk-or-Treat, or the upcoming Flea Marché parking lot lawn sale. In the meantime, while the folks in our church office continue to work hard on our behalf, the church building will remain closed to casual use.

It's a lot to take in, I know. A *lot*. Again, none of us has been this way before, and doubtless as our situation continues to change, we will need to amend these guidelines. For the moment, though, this is where we are, *together*. I give thanks for your patience, perseverance, and your prayerful participation in the life of our church in all your strength and vulnerability, and for your continued commitment to moving forward *together* into whatever comes next with grace, care, and faithful reliance on the leading of the Holy Spirit. God bless our church, each and all of us, and continue to make us a blessing to others.

Peace,
Rev. John MacIver Gage
on behalf of Rev. Maddie Foster, the Boards of Directors and Deacons, and the COVID Advisory Team of the Congregational Church of Needham (MA), UCC

FOCUS

Contributions are welcome. Please submit materials by e-mail to office@needhamucc.org.

June issue deadline:
May 24th

Rev. John MacIver Gage
Senior Minister
revjohn@needhamucc.org

Rev. Maddie Foster
CE & Youth Director
revmaddie@needhamucc.org

Valerie Becker
Music Director
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Danielle Jurdan
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Judith Stewart, Moderator
moderator@needhamucc.org

The Deacons
Nancy Lane, Chair
emaildeacons@needhamucc.org

Pastoral Relations
Committee
prc@needhamucc.org

To provide feedback about any aspect of the church, email feedback@needhamucc.org

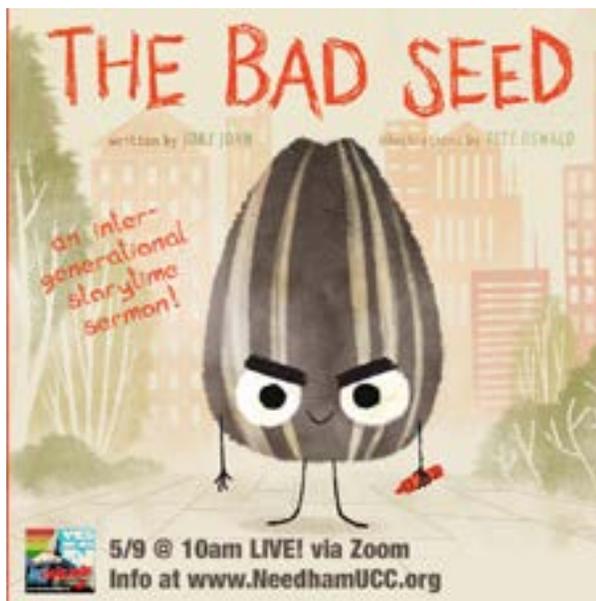
Coming Up in Worship This May

May 2: "God is Love. Love is God"

The writer of 1 John claims that "God is love." Love then is the radical standard against which we can judge everything, even the will of God – or what some claim is the will of God. 1 John 4:7-21

May 9: "The Bad Seed"

Just because bad things happen to you or you feel bad, that doesn't make you a bad seed, or a bad person. An important life lesson and an intergenerational storytime sermon from the book by Jory John with illustrations by Pete Oswald

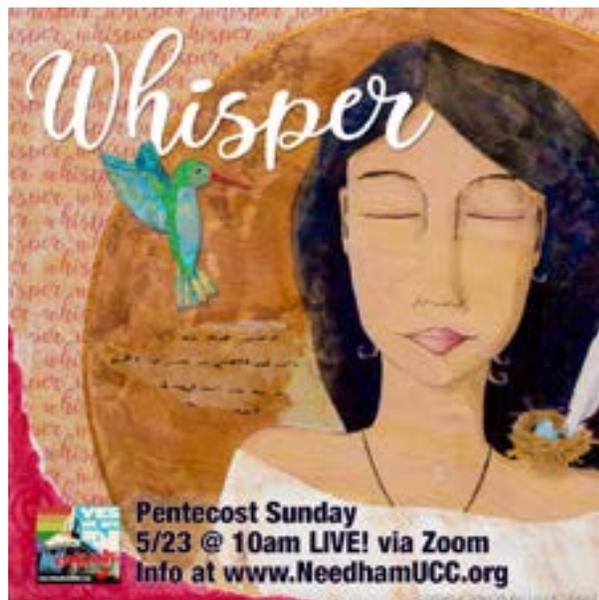


May 16: "In Praise of Ugly & Useless Creatures"

In this service for the Blessing of the Animals, we'll give thanks to God for the gift of our beloved companions and the animals we don't understand (and maybe don't even like). Bring your pets, farm animals, and stuffed animal friends to Zoom church today! Job 39:13-18

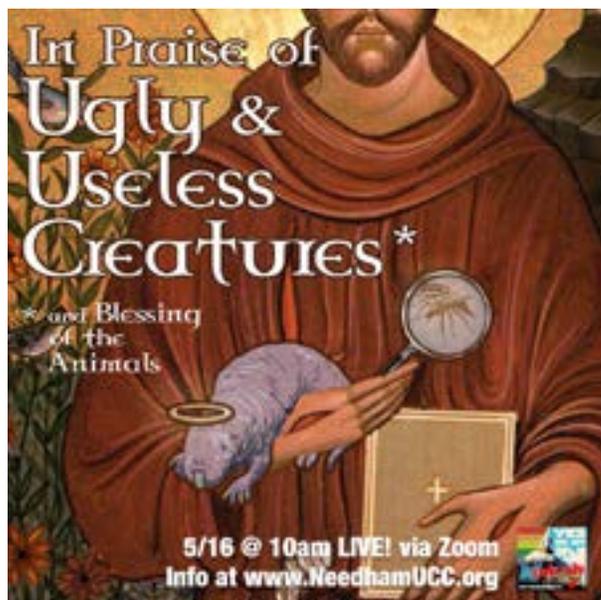
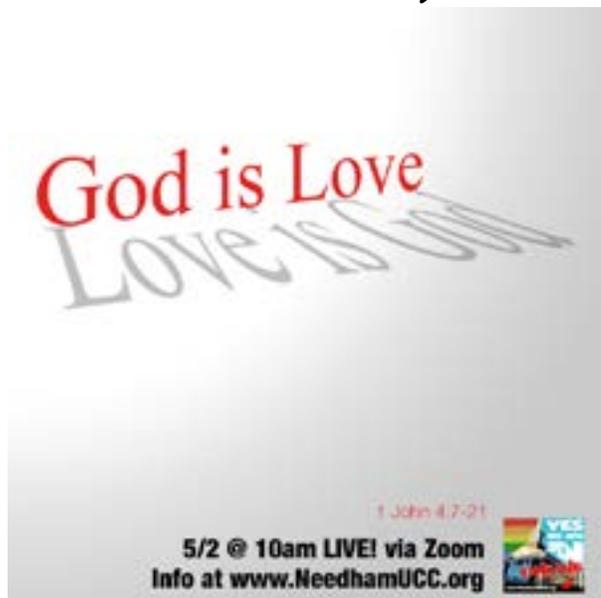
May 23: "Whisper"

Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the same Spirit who turned the disciples into messengers of good news "with the sound of a violent wind." But something doesn't have to be loud to be important or powerful. Romans 8:22-27



May 30: "Trinity"

At first glance, the doctrine of the Trinity may seem like some kind of mathematical joke. How can 1 really be 3 or 3 be 1? But maybe the point isn't knowing God with our heads but with our hearts? Kind of like people. It's not that logic and reason aren't important. They're just so limited and limiting. John 3:1-10





'Reportback' Recap

The February delegation Reportback on April 18th attracted a broad audience of more than 40 attendees who enjoyed Jeff Clausen's historical slide presentation, highlighting the engagement of our church during 34 years of partnership with the people of Santa María Tzejá. Folks responded with enthusiastic comments and good questions. If you happened to miss the presentation, or would like to see it again, you can find a PDF version at: <http://www.guatemalapartners.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/04/Condensed-presentation-dbj-April-2021-1.pdf>

Vaccine Status in Guatemala

Echoing trends of vaccine inequality worldwide, barely 1 in 9,000 Guatemalans have been fully vaccinated against Covid-19 to date, compared to 1 in every 4 Massachusetts residents. One percent of the population has received the first of two doses. Workers in health care and other emergency services as well as people over age 70 are currently eligible for vaccination. The rollout is expected to speed up with the arrival of millions of Sputnik doses in the coming weeks.

'Pursuing Justice at Home and Abroad' - Speaker Event, May 16th, 7 pm

Join us on Sunday, May 16th at 7:00 pm for a discussion of the pursuit of justice in Guatemala and beyond. For decades, our sister community of Santa María Tzejá has sought accountability for the genocide committed against its people. While a handful of human rights cases have prospered in domestic courts, rampant corruption and impunity have led some survivors to carry their grievances to international tribunals. Featuring commentary by Edwin Canil and Paula Worby, we'll examine the challenges, outcomes, and possibilities for justice in national and international settings. Watch for the Zoom link in the Friday church e-mail/Constant Contact.

Guatemala Yard Sale - September 18th / Hold Those Treasures!

The annual Guatemala Yard Sale date has been set for Saturday, September 18th! So as you do your spring and/or pandemic cleaning, please set aside your clean and best-quality items (but no clothing), including:

Kitchen and household items, children's gear, toys, games, and puzzles for all ages, current sports equipment (from recent ski boots to hockey gear, etc.), bikes, collectible or vintage items, jewelry, framed artwork, electronics (no TV's or computers), books/DVD's/records, outdoor furniture, or small furniture items. Donations will be accepted the week before the sale. For questions please contact Brenda Metzler: bmetzler7@verizon.net.



Environmental Ministries Team News

...earth stewardship for our lives today...

Spring is here!!

Do you have spring gardening questions? We've got answers!

Master Gardeners staff free hotlines at Massachusetts Horticultural Society and Tower Hill Botanic Garden. Feel free to use both below-listed numbers/emails. If volunteers are not there when you reach out, leave a voicemail or email and someone will reply when next on duty.

Massachusetts Horticultural Society Helpline

Staffed April through October on Mondays/Wednesdays/Fridays, 10 AM - 2 PM.
617-933-4929 or EBHelpline@MassMasterGardeners.org.

Tower Hill Botanic Garden Hotline

Staffed through end of April on Wednesdays, 12-4 PM
Staffed May and June on Wednesdays, 12-4 PM and Thursdays, 9 AM - 1 PM.
508-869-6111, x104 or Hortline@TowerHillBG.org.

UMass Amherst Center for Agriculture, Food, and the Environment

The UMass extension has over 150 online home garden fact sheets, and a horticultural newsletter for home gardeners called Garden Clippings. They also provide soil testing and plant problem diagnostics.
Ag.umass.edu/resources/home-lawn-garden
Ag.umass.edu/services/soil-plant-nutrient-testing-laboratory

Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

The Mass Master Gardener Association has a new monthly newsletter, "The Dirt", featuring gardening resources and tips. They are hosting and Home Gardening Webinar Series, Wednesday evenings on May 5, 12, 19 and 26 and will cover perennial plant selection, vegetable gardening, landscaping basics, container gardening. The series cost is \$60.
Mass.mastergardeners.org.

Needham Community Farm seedling sales

May 8 - cold weather vegetables
May 22 - warmer weather seedlings
At Needham Historical Center and Museum, 1147 Central Ave.,
10 AM - 3 PM
Needhamfarm.org



Finance Team Update

First Quarter 2021 Report Finance Update

At the Annual Meeting, we adopted an operating budget, which anticipated revenues of \$756,223 inclusive of \$401,423 in pledges, \$92,000 income from rentals and \$216,500 funded from Endowment including \$12,500 from the Konetsky Trust to support music. This is Year 1 of a 3-year strategy to reduce reliance upon the Endowment for operations to a sustainable, healthy level. Specifically, the 2021 budget anticipates breakeven operations supported by Endowment's General Fund equal to 11% of the 3-year average unrestricted endowment, which is less than the 15% we were headed toward based on our expense trajectory. To recap, over the next two years, the reliance upon endowment is planned to reduce to 9% and 7% respectively. Work has already begun to explore ways to enhance revenue via increased membership, increased rental revenue and fundraising opportunities beyond our annual stewardship campaign. These efforts offer a pathway to a model for sustainable operations supported by a healthy 5% of the 3-yr average of our unrestricted Endowment balance.

For the first quarter, pledges, worship collections and gifts totaled \$154k, well ahead of \$106k YTD plan as of 3/31/21. This positive variance is largely due to members prepaying approximately \$48k of

2021 pledges. Rentals and other income are slightly ahead of plan. The church has not yet drawn funds from the Endowment. As a result, YTD revenues are \$3k behind plan overall.

Expenses are \$4k over plan for the three-month period. To date, we are anticipating insurance and interest expenses to each be approximately \$4k over budget for the year based on timing for interest and market increases in premiums for insurance. Other expenses are influenced by timing factors such as building expenses for 1154 and 1180 GPA tending to be higher in first quarter due to utility costs. Net operations are thus \$7k behind plan for the first three months. However, actual pledges are approximately \$18k above budget due to pledges received after the budget was finalized in January.

Other updates include:

- Endowment is up 3.8% for the first quarter.
- Church has received a \$33k bequest from the Axt Trust which will be contributed to the Endowment, a portion of which will support investment in equipment needed for hybrid worship.
- Third party reviewer has been engaged and a review of financial operations will be completed in third quarter.

Respectfully submitted,
Trish Marinilli

Summary Operating Statement -- Year to Date March 31, 2021				May FOCUS			
	2021	31-Mar-21	31-Mar-21	Favorable / (unfavorable)			
000s	Annual Budget	Budget YTD	Actual YTD	(\$)	(%)		
REVENUE							
Pledges	\$ 401.4	\$ 100.4	\$ 143.1	\$ 42.7	43%		
Other Member Contributions	21.3	5.3	10.7	5.4	101%		
Endowment	216.5	54.1	-	(54.1)	-100%		
Rentals	92.0	23.0	24.3	1.3	6%		
Other/Miscellaneous	25.0	6.3	7.9	1.6	26%		
Total Revenue	756.2	189.1	185.9	(3.1)	-2%		
OPERATING EXPENSES							
Benevolence Giving	24.5	6.1	5.8	0.4	6%		
Minister & Staff	437.0	109.2	104.0	5.2	5%		
Education & Worship	6.9	1.7	0.2	1.5	88%		
Music	57.2	14.4	13.2	1.1	8%		
Parish Admin	30.8	7.7	7.1	0.6	7%		
Building Maintenance	134.9	33.7	41.4	(7.7)	-23%		
1180 GPA	13.5	3.4	6.2	(2.8)	-84%		
Other	51.4	12.8	15.1	(2.3)	-18%		
Total Expenses	756.2	189.1	193.1	(4.1)	-2%		
Operating Surplus / (Deficit)	\$ -	\$ -	\$ (7.2)	\$ (7.2)			

WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP & ADULT ED

WORSHIP TOGETHER ONLINE

Sundays @10am

We'll be using Zoom and will have the same Zoom link, phone number and Meeting ID every Sunday.

The Zoom link is

<https://zoom.us/j/907548568>

The call-in number is Tel ((253) 215-8782 or (301) 715-8592

The Meeting ID number is 907 548 568.



Feel free to invite your friends and family to join us, too, no matter where they live, and share this sign-in information with them. We don't want anyone who wants to be connected with a spiritual community in this turbulent time to go without.

PS: *Worship the first Sunday of the month and on holidays will include our celebration of holy communion. Please prepare your own elements--something to eat and drink. Hint: It doesn't have to be bread and grape juice.*

MEN'S FELLOWSHIP

Sunday, May 16th @ 9:15am

LIVE! via Zoom at <https://zoom.us/j/93975548873?pwd=S3AydjcxQjdjUGhUaW8rM0dlQnpvUT09>



Sure, the breakfast may be BYOBreakfast at this point, but the fellowship remains as rich as ever. Join us for conversation around worship scripture.

What does prayer look like in your life? Does it feel like you thought/

were taught it would? What do you think prayer is supposed to do? Is that working? for you?

ALL men in the congregation are invited to this time of reflection and fellowship.

MINDFUL MEDITATION ONLINE

Sundays @7pm

Stressed? Worried? Scared? Bone-Tired? There's never been a better time to lean into mindful meditation. It's a way to reel in all our frayed emotional-mental-physical feelers and ground ourselves again in the present moment.

Join us online on the Zoom platform. Contact Sue Findlay or the office at office@needhamucc.org or 781-444-2510 for the Zoom details

NEEDHAM COMMUNITY FARM

Sunday, May 23rd @11:11am

Join Liz Perkus farm manager who will present about

the Needham Community Farm. We'll learn about the Farm's mission, how they are providing food for those who experience food insecurity, how you can take one of their classes or join their CSA, and how you can support the farm. Come join one of the biggest trends of 2020-21 growing your own food.

WOMEN'S BOOK GROUP: WHAT WE DON'T TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT FAT

Thursdays beginning April 29th @ 8pm

What attitudes have we learned from American culture and the wider church about our bodies? Together we will read "What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat" by Audrey Gordon and we'll explore these attitudes and our own experiences as we consider the bodies we inhabit, sacred and precious at every size and ability. We'll read and discuss one chapter each week. If you'd like to participate, please email RevMaddie@needhamucc.org.

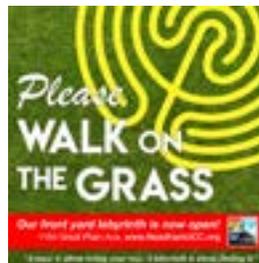
PURSuing JUSTICE AT HOME AND ABROAD

Sunday, May 16th @7pm

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"A MAZE IS ABOUT LOSING YOUR WAY.

A LABYRINTH IS ABOUT FINDING IT."



A labyrinth is an ancient spiritual tool, a walking meditation for the heart, mind, soul, and body. Though labyrinths certainly predate Christianity, they have been incorporated into Christian practice over the centuries.

Please enjoy our outdoor labyrinth on the front lawn of the church at 1154 Great Plain Ave. We're inviting our whole community to enjoy it as well. There are information sheets available there with suggestions for how to approach walking. Thanks to Rev. Maddie and Diana Conroy for doing the painstaking work of laying it out for us.

Hello from the Fundraising Committee!

We're excited to announce our first big Community fundraising event of 2021, the Flea Marché, on June 12th, 9:00am-1:00pm (rain date 6/19). There will be a wonderful mix of used treasures and new crafts & original art vendors, as well as a bake sale and other treats. There are several ways you can participate:

1. Simply join the fun, shop & eat
2. Spread the word to your friends to come shop, or sell their new or used goods (\$25 per parking spot to bring a careful of sales items - details can be found here: <https://www.needhamucc.org/flea-marche.html>)
3. Help on the day of the event (contact kristin@mollerus.net to volunteer)
4. If you'd like to donate your goods for the church to sell, please drop them off at Dave & Caryl Johnson's house (505 Great Plain Avenue) in their garage between June 4th-June 10th. The list of acceptable items is as follows:

- Framed fine art
- Books (no text books or how-to manuals from prior to 2018 PLEASE!)
- Puzzles- complete only
- Board Games-complete only
- Children's COMPLETE craft sets and toys
- Infant/Toddler equipment clean and in working order (no cribs)
- Sports Equipment- complete and in working order (but no large indoor exercise items like stationary bikes, treadmills)
- Bikes, skis, skates and skateboards etc.
- Collectibles- PLEASE GIVE US AS MUCH INFORMATION AS YOU HAVE- THAT WILL GET US BETTER PRICES!
- Dinnerware and kitchenware
- Glassware ("One offs" unless exceptional will not be accepted; no plasticware for this sale please!)
- Ceramics
- Craft supplies in good condition
- Working lamps
- Garden Equipment/Accessories
- Non-powered tools (workshop, yard)

This event will be safely held in our church parking lot, socially distanced, and with hand sanitizer at every table, and a wonderful way to be with the community at large!

Yours in faith,
The Fundraising Team

Sun., May 23rd after Worship @11:15 am



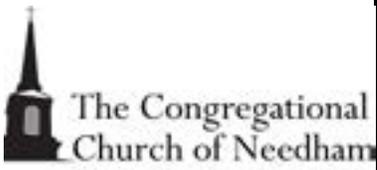
Liz Perkus farm manager, Needham Community Farm, will be joining us to talk about the Farm. We'll learn about the Farm's mission and how they are providing food for those who

experience food insecurity. Learn how you can take one of their classes or join their CSA. Lastly, she will discuss how you can support the farm.

Come join one of the biggest trends of 2020-21 - growing your own food.

Earth Day activities at Needham Community Farm and the Church Grounds





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office@needhamucc.org

On the web at
needhamucc.org

On the twitter
[@needhamucc](https://twitter.com/needhamucc)

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And now... We're a Podcast!

In an attempt to make our weekly sermons more accessible and more useful to you, we've created a new, audio-only podcast we're calling

"Yes! We're Open: Living Faith with Needham UCC"

Find us on podcast providers including **iTunes**, **Spotify**, and others. (If you can't find it on your favorite service, let us know and we'll put it there.) So now it's even easier to listen to a sermon again or for the first time, around the house, in the car, or while you're out walking off the pandemic blues. You can even easily share a sermon or the whole podcast with someone you think might enjoy it. It's a great way to share our church. **So like it, subscribe, and start listening now.** (Oh, and give us a "like" to make it easier for others to find our podcast, too. (Find it now at <http://needhamucc.buzzsprout.com>)



address

stamp

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 UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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