



**First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
*Creating Community, Welcoming All***

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sermon Rev. David Jones Sunday, January 15, 2023 Jesus and King as Social Examples

Martin Luther King Sunday is cause for celebration. And it is cause for reflection. I don't need to tell you that our country and our communities have made important progress in no small part thanks to justice-oriented churches like ours. I also do not need to tell you that our country is, economically speaking, as unequal as it has been at any time since the "roaring 20s"-- a decade that has been synonymous with inequality for a hundred years. Obviously, a lot has changed since 1968 when Martin Luther King's ministry was violently ended, but there is something we cannot easily set aside--a resonance, a sense of *deja vu*--that the tension between progress in civil rights was not translating then or now into fairness in our economy. We know each other well enough, and we have learned from the work of Mary Mosley recently, which was so beautifully exhibited here in our sanctuary, that many of the people in our pews today and in our congregation--and many of our neighbors in Ashfield and in the hilltowns--are struggling to make ends meet.

And I struggle with *that*, with what it means to have a worship service every Sunday that delights in a Creator who made us all in the same divine image, who promised all her children the same milk and honey--that reads from an ancient and sacred text that frequently implores us, as Mary did, to honor our elders--only to depart from this place knowing full well we are not all doing okay, we are not equally fortunate, we are not all equally cared for or respected or included. We all struggle with this, I'm sure, this overwhelming feeling sometimes, that what we say is not what we are doing as a community.

There is a temptation when this feeling comes over us, to confess or to scold ourselves. To look in the mirror and feel let down in some way. This is the trouble I have with the language we sometimes use to talk about Jesus--or Dr. King for that matter--as a moral exemplar. Not because that's incorrect, these men certainly set moral examples to follow, and there are many such people in our midst. But it makes me uneasy sometimes because Jesus was just one person, Dr. King just one person--and one person cannot take away the unfair burdens placed on our seniors in Ashfield or on our children. None of us on our own can. One person can be lovely and kind and full of meaning and value, but one person--even ones as great as Jesus or King--cannot secure justice on their own.

I recognize some of us, like myself, focus so much on Jesus because we make certain theological claims about him. But apart from those claims, as an historical figure, as a man, Jesus is not particularly important as an individual. Rather he is important to us as a leader. A leader sets not so much a moral example for individuals to achieve but a *social* or communal example for a society or a community to achieve. Jesus sought to create a particular kind of community. He and his disciples and all who gathered to them, searched together for what it means and what it looks like to live alongside one another, hand-in-hand, as people named by God. This is the thing we have to be so careful not to lose in our churches now. Jesus and his followers were so sure that God and God alone could be said to possess the land or to own the earth as a dwelling place--that only God was sovereign over all Creation and all humanity--that when they saw that some Roman and a few temple authorities had set themselves up over the people of first century Palestine, they were thoroughly unimpressed. This is how a peace-loving teacher becomes an enemy of the state, this is how someone turning water into wine becomes despised. Jesus did not recognize the authority of the men who had set themselves up as kings. His heavenly Father alone created life, it was his Father alone who created the vines, who could be said to own the vineyard.

As a man like any other, Jesus could probably be said to have been naive, foolish, certainly reckless, because in the face of the largest and most violent force at that time in all of human history, the Roman Empire, Jesus calmly asserted the sole and indivisible kingdom of the Love in whose image we are all created. He called it the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God; others like those in Solentiname have called it the kingdom of justice. King called it the beloved community.

So, it can feel a little reductionist to say, well we should be like Jesus. What we really mean, or what I think we ought to mean, is that we should, with the same urgency and the same confidence, be gathering and building up a community like the one he was working on so long ago, like the one Dr. King was working on not so long ago. A community where no one can be evicted from their home, where no child's school is considered worse than another's, where no life is ever written off or thrown away because of addiction or health or ability, where no one is any less invited to the table of abundance because of their sexuality or gender identity, because of their race or nationality or religion. We should be building the fairest and most just town, and it should be a place that has no need of Food Pantries or ministerial discretionary funds because it has become a place where no one is going hungry and no one is living in a cold home.

Jesus' conviction in this idea of beloved community, this social exemplar that he and his followers provide, was not a 'liberal' or a 'conservative' or a 'progressive' one, it was not capitalistic or socialistic. A better word for it might be "radical" except that the meaning of that word has been largely forgotten. Radical means "forming the root;" Jesus' community could be called radical in the sense that it is insisting on something inherent, something that precedes music and poetry, that precedes feats of engineering and scientific discoveries, that comes before one's country, that is even before language and families of every kind. This community is radical because it grows from the same Love in whose image we are all made, from the same Love who is God, who is our only true sovereign.

Jesus' community was and was to be radically formed on that. Remember that Jesus says, however you have treated the least of these, is how you have treated me. Remember that Jesus does not imagine a Good Samaritan who asks if the person in need of help "qualifies" for it; a Good Samaritan who can help, helps without question. Remember that Jesus and Dr. King have in common the idea that fairness has nothing to do with such little things as what we do for a living or what abilities we each have developed; fairness is a feature of the root, it is fundamental to how and why the great garden of Eden in all its variety and diversity will bloom again, it is how and why heaven must come to be on earth, how and why we will get to those blue hills on the other shore, how and why the Table can come to have a place for set for everyone with enough bread and juice for all. Fairness is first, it is fixed in the earth and strong to stand forever. Treating someone fairly is not a matter of moral judgment, it is a matter of inherent social possibility, it can always be offered like grace to all who will receive it.

Of course, the hard part is that not all will agree to receive it. Scripture teaches us the idea of "hardening one's heart" against God's love. The prophet Isaiah says today that God's love and law, God's way and presence, are written onto our hearts. This suggests a natural softness, that God's gentle writing can make an impression on us, our bodies are fit to receive and display it. This makes us all glorious, it is the inner light we received and passed between ourselves on Christmas Eve. We aren't God, but God is written right there on our hearts—and our hearts beat! They emanate and can share God's love with others; we are marked as God's children and we are blessed with life to go and do this godly thing. But when someone's heart has been hardened, it is a different thing. The people who killed Jesus and who shot Dr. King, these are people who had hardened their hearts, they had made themselves unwilling to receive the restoration into love that these teachers were offering. In the face of the radical love and fairness of a new and beloved community, these people resorted to violence in defense of the communities that had wandered so far astray.

So as always there is good news and trouble. We are all inherently made in the image of love and the vast, vast majority of people are living within the reach of loving leaders like Dr. King. But reaching people can be hard, there can be obstacles, hearts can be hardened by this world, by rulers who deceive and mislead. And there is no mistaking how polarized and unstable our communities have become. One

of the gifts of Hugo's arrival in my life is becoming so much more mindful and in-the-present that I have not had time to keep up with the news. But at some point, I'll get caught up, and something tells me not much will have changed.

So what are we to do with all this, how do we apply the radical social or communal examples of Jesus and King to our lives together in Ashfield, in the hilltowns, in Franklin County, in the nearby river valley? Certainly, we have a social responsibility, as followers of Dr. King, to educate ourselves and combat racism. This work is ongoing. And we should be startled by the tension between, on the one hand, the important progress that has been made in our country even as economic inequality has dramatically worsened.

I think our Psalm today is part of the answer of how to go forward. It is an affirmation of evangelism—again, we need to recover the meaning of this word, which is simply to spread and proclaim the good news, to not hide the love that would save us. To not keep the love in our hearts a secret. And the good news is that God calls us and this love on our hearts to the work of restoration, to forming the root again, to co-creating a community that is fair and inclusive of everyone. We can all be evangelists for that. Believing that it is possible, being steadfast in our faith, we can ask each other both in this church and outside it, what would make this town more loving than it is? What would make Ashfield more just for seniors on fixed incomes in this time of inflation? What would make it more just for our young families, for working people in this time of low wages, whose labor too often does not cover the cost of both utilities *and* food? What would make the hilltowns freer for people of faith and goodwill who would love to congregate on Sundays but are too busy or too distressed to take on yet another commitment?

Life can be – and often is – better here in the hilltowns and in Western Mass than just about anywhere else. We are blessed in so many ways. But I have seen—and we all have seen—that it is not always as fair as it could, and it is not always just, and we do not yet always do what we say we should do as a community. How do we become more beloved to Dr. King, and to Jesus, and to our great spirit, our sole Creator, our God-who-is-the love that has chosen us all?

Alleluia and amen.