



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 22, 2023 Chasing the Light

We are in that tough time of the New England year, when winter has mostly lost its novelty and charm and it just starts to be a stubborn, cold fact. However, the beauty of Ashfield in the wake of a snowstorm—the heavy, coated limbs of the trees, the way the snow bunches and clings to their trunks, how the white snow gilds the rooftops—provided us a much needed spiritual boost—and a photo opportunity.

I remember way back at the beginning of the pandemic, many of us found time to renew old hobbies or start new ones. In October, I unfortunately got Covid, and finally I also picked up a new hobby. I had started to feel better and was desperate to get outside after being cooped up, but I was still isolating—so I went for a walk in the Arms Cemetery in Shelburne Falls, and I brought along my neglected camera. It was a warm, sunny day, and the trees and the blue sky were bright. Everything was drenched and shimmering in the sunlight.

Anyway, I've kept this hobby up, and I have been enjoying taking pictures enough that now I rarely leave the house without my camera. I have learned that one of the most important ingredients of a good photo is having your camera with you when it presents itself. And if you are open to it, a photo is always presenting itself. I have heard photography described as a matter of "chasing the light." And I have begun to wonder if I've been enjoying it so much because *chasing the light* seems also to describe one's faith journey. With a camera in hand, what is commonplace, what is banal or mundane, what is taken for granted, suddenly blooms with promise for the moment when it will be struck by the right light. With faith in hand, or goodwill, the world around us—nature and society both—become part and parcel of the Creator; everything matters, everything is worthy of inquiry and of care with faith in our own hands.

To feed my new habit, I follow a lot of photographers on social media. I have the impression that photographers who do not need to worry about money will travel to famous places or to famous sights; equipped with the most expensive cameras, they take stunning pictures, but sometimes these pictures can seem fleeting, remote, as if there is something missing, something vacant. If a photographer or any artist does not have a relationship with their subject, even the most beautiful images can be shallow, can be lacking in clear purpose or meaning.

With faith it is the same. We can believe we are children of the light, but if the causes we take up or the concepts we express do not have a bearing, a relationship, to where we are and to the people we intend to serve, no matter how beautiful our beliefs may be, they too can become fleeting and shallow. "Chasing the light" may still be what we are doing, but if we find the light and yet it does not warm us, if we find it and yet it does not feed us or help us grow, if it does not guide us and change us, and transform the space we stand in and the people who stand with us, then there is a sense in which our faith is just an abstraction, a sense in which it literally does not matter because it is not relevant to the lives we are leading.

Impactful faith, like impactful or effective photography, will not just look at light as a static element; rather the photographer or the person of faith will be involved with the light, will adjust with it, and come to anticipate its movement. Faith will be a practice, conspiring with the light, becoming *like* the light, feeding the person of faith and everyone the person of faith comes into contact with as the

light does. If we search for the light just to say we have found it, just to show off our good photo or to show off our good, educated beliefs, we will never actually be moved or seized by it, and we will never wield it to make our world better.

We understand this in our congregation. We as a church and as individuals are constantly working to put our faith into practice. We are like James and John, we are prepared to go fishing for the kingdom of justice, to draw in people in the work and service of a new, beloved community. But we are only one church. And I think we do have to contend, in our area, with a tendency among churches to be overly reactive to the national or international situation, and especially to how the news media decides to report it. Too often the Church as an institution can become part of what is already established, and can become a symbol of the status quo, of a static or frozen situation; what is top of mind in the Church is too often exactly what is above the fold on the front page of major newspapers, or in the lead-off segments on cable news. Obviously we need to be informed of the larger context we are ministering in. But with a camera helping me to see recently, I have been reminded that we can learn about this context just as well by looking around at what is right in front of us.

One thing about chasing the light, you spend a lot of time looking at the absence of light. In searching for something gentle and lovely, you also take in a lot of what is harsh and ugly. And that's when, hopefully, some skill or imagination or even faith can enter into the picture and transform what we see, and therefore transform what is possible.

For example, taking drives around the Hilltowns to get a new picture, I have been struck by how down one road will be a huge, newly built house, and down the next will be houses practically falling over. I have even seen people without a home at all outside the Big Y in Greenfield, while I see other homes that appear to be sitting vacant. I have seen that our churches are busiest, in Charlemont or Shelburne Falls or in Ashfield, not on Sundays but on the days when the Food Pantry distributes food to our congregants and neighbors. I went once to see the beautiful Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, which spans a sprawling, industrial campus—it is a real gem of Western Mass. But I saw only a few guides and service workers, maybe a hundred employees in buildings that once employed thousands.

We don't need the New York Times or CNN to tell us we live in an unequal society. We don't need peer-reviewed studies to find that our area has declined economically and that too many of our people are hurting. And actually if we are willing to look closely at where we are living, and learn about this situation from our own community, from our own people, we will learn much more than we could from an article or cable news segment. We can learn how the lack of services and infrastructure in our rural communities can undermine our people's efforts to get back on their feet. We can learn how credit scores and predatory lending punish people for being poor, how inadequate social welfare can entrap our neighbors in poverty. We will learn how damaging it is that housing in our area can use up 40 even 50 percent of a person's income, leaving them with too little to keep food on the table and too little to keep the heat on, let alone to build up any savings for the future or for retirement. We will learn how our seniors cannot afford to retire, or if they have retired, often struggle when housing and utilities use up their social security check the first of every month. And we will learn that these things have nothing to do with people's morality or righteousness or work ethic or the presence of God's love in their homes—except that it offends God, who is loving parent to us all and the source of all light, that we tolerate this way of things, and have for so long.

Because the thing about faith is — about the prophetic faith upon which Jesus stands, and into which his followers are called — is that it is relentless in bearing witness to the light even in dark places. And Jesus says to us — and Paul does too, in his letter to the Corinthians, who are bickering and competing with one another — that in a world where sensibility and respectability and orderliness and decency have blocked out the light of our Creator, where the people are walking and living with the idea that it is okay for children of God to suffer and struggle and to be left on their own to fend for themselves as if Christ himself had been divided up between us, that in such a state as we are in today, we will need to repent, we will need to be prepared to turn from what is considered the “normal” or

expected path. We will need to be prepared to be called fools, to be considered naive and foolish, to be thought un-serious people, in order to insist on finding the light again.

Jesus went to John to be baptized, and John went to Jesus, and this whole ministry that gathers us here today got going on the act of repentance, which means to turn around or to think again and to go a new way—it means a change in mind *and* in direction. Jesus says “repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.” He says, turn around and look, *chase the light*, follow love’s demands to their radical conclusions of equality and justice—do this, do life *differently*, do it not for yourself, not for your own biological family, not for your own country, but do it for all your siblings, for your community, actually become like the light that shines on all people the same and without judgment. This is why Paul says, you know, this stuff can sound so foolish to those on the old path. If you are on that path that says it's normal and good to accumulate wealth and live more comfortably than others, that it's normal for the majority of Americans to live paycheck to paycheck, to be one emergency away from crisis, obviously Jesus’ teachings and the cross itself will sound and look like nonsense. Jesus was so foolish he even died standing up for what the powerful said was foolish.

I am not as strong as James and John, I have not really set my net down, I’m still fishing, because I do want to be respectable, that’s my weakness, I can’t stand to be thought of as foolish. I care what people think about me and my ideas. I worry that my photos are cliché or bad, and I worry that my ideas of love and justice are not serious enough, not realistic enough. So Jesus says to me, too, repent, go another way. Stop editing and censoring and holding back, stop saying *less* than the gospel, stop being at ease while I can see with my own eyes that others are at unease, stop emptying the cross of its power. Get out of the boat, and proclaim the good news of the kingdom, because it really is near. If I do—and I do at times, in precious moments, when the weather has been uplifting or inspiring— I do find that all God’s children are still drenched in the light, that we are still made of it, and our communities, flawed as they are, are as full of promise as ever.

It is hard to always live up to Jesus’s commandments, to leave our boat and even our families, to follow him. It is hard to remember, like the Corinthians, what really matters and what is really at stake when we gather. But that’s why I am here. I am chasing the light, and you are too. We have been led to the same place. It has led us to form a church community, a community within a community, that is strong enough together to do as James and John once did. Now we chase the light together.

Alleluia and amen.