



**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 29, 2023**

**Character and Choir**

Our scriptures today do not talk about music, they don't describe worship, don't mention any ritual or burnt offerings. They don't make any mention of a choir, or even choir directors. But they do talk about character. They do talk about identity, about commitment to faith or to principle, and they especially talk about our behavior as people in relation to other people. This is very important: to do right by people, according to our readings this morning, *is* the same thing as to do right by God.

Our scriptures define righteousness in that way, in that direction; if we wish to live with God in this life, we must live with people in this life. And live in what way: just what kind of person living with other people, gets to dwell also with God, gets to enter into God's tent? Again, the answer is not someone with a perfect voice or perfect pitch, it's not someone that is more talented, more skilled, not someone more educated, or well read or a world traveler, not someone who is brilliant, not a professional person or a successful person, not a wealthy person, the answer is not even ordained ministers. The kind of person who lives most closely to God, who is most intimate and dear to God on this earth, in *this* very life, is someone who sincerely tries to do the right thing, who speaks honestly and from their heart; it is someone who is kind to others and supportive of others, someone who refuses to take advantage of anyone else.

And then more than this, according to the good news as Mathew writes it, as the world of human history takes shape, as human communities have formed unevenly and unequally within time, not only can certain kinds of people dwell with God based on how they treat others, but God will also choose to dwell with certain kinds of people based on how others are treating them. (The word "blessed" in Matthew has that meaning, of favor; who God blesses means who God favors). By our kindness and humility and in fair dealing with others, we can ascend to great spiritual heights; we can go up the hill and live among the clouds, and breathe cool, refreshing air. But also, in our experience of being wronged, or choosing to seek out and stand in solidarity with those who are being wronged, like Tyre Nichols, we will find that God is there in the thick of earth waiting for us, stooped already as low as this world has made some of us to feel or to be. God ennobles us by welcoming us into God's dwelling place, but we enoble God by welcoming God into our struggles for justice. As it turns out, God wants to live with us as badly as we want to live with God.

This is finally where our worship life comes into the picture, even if it is not mentioned in our readings today. Because we worship in order to bridge these two wants—God's and ours; we worship to bridge heaven and earth, to bridge God's dwelling place and our own, between what God has promised us and what too many of us are still struggling with.

I know that sounds awfully lofty for congregationalists—or rather, it sounds awfully lofty until you hear our choir on a Sunday. That is until you hear one choir member confide to you that this choir gave them their life, and another confide that this choir is their place in this world, their home, that it brings them out of their shell and connects them to something bigger than themselves. In our church it isn't always faith or religion that gathers us together, it is not always a sacrament or a set of beliefs that lets us consider this sanctuary a place where we each can belong. It is not always "God" and definitely not always scripture that is lifting us up in times of grief or reaching out to us in times of loneliness or isolation or fear. It is how we treat each other. It is how we make room for each other. And it is how an

exceedingly talented, gifted choir director weaves voices of different training and different ability and different belief into one voice of goodwill toward this place where we live and toward the people we share it with. If you are in our choir or in our congregation when our choir sings, a deep love and respect for this community is unmistakable.

For a long time, longer than 25 years, this house of prayer has connected all kinds of people to the heavenly and to the earthly with music that transports us up and away from the world around us, and with music that carries us like strong, perhaps trembling arms right into the center of the grief of this world. But for the last 25 years, it has been Margery who has been our choir director and who has been such a faithful and supportive partner to the organist and accompanist and to the minister, to Amy, to Kate, to Ann and Nancy, to myself and others. And Margery has modeled the character of this church for us, with her humility and her devotion, with her sincere caring toward us, with her sensitivity to what each of us is dealing with in our own lives, and with her understanding that every voice has a right to be heard, and every person has a right to be included. She has also modeled hard work, and she has shown us how high expectations are best met collectively, how excellence can and will be achieved when we share responsibility for it, and that whatever difficulty or challenge we may have to go through in preparing—whatever rehearsal looked like on Wednesday, or however trying the hour before worship was, when it is over, when the congregation has been sent forth, we should be and we will be proud of what we have accomplished together.

Margery's combination of skill and thoughtfulness, of hard work and love for the people she ministers with, have made singing in our choir and in our congregation incredibly rewarding. We cannot thank Margery enough. And I also cannot quite put into words how much I have learned from Margery about the importance of what we do when we worship, in that lofty sense I was describing earlier, as a bridge or meeting place between God and us, but also in a much more personal, immediate sense, as a means of caring for the people with whom we share this church, and with whom we share our lives. Even down to the titles in the bulletin, the precise placement of dates, it is all, in its way, a matter of being the best version of ourselves, and showing anyone who may stumble in, how highly we regard them, how faithfully we see them, and how important it is to us that we serve them. I have sometimes shared the union slogan, that "nothing is too good for the working class"; Margery's careful and precise work, and the music she leads us to make year after year, seems to say, "there is nothing too good for the people of this church and this community, nothing too good for the beloved children of God."

I have to be brief because we have lots of work to do today, and lots of work to do in the coming months and years in building up this church. But let us give thanks now—and be in a spirit of thanksgiving—that as we do this work, we will have our choir to bring us closer to God, and to bring God closer to us.

Alleluia and amen.

## **Litany of Blessing and Covenant**

Written by Rev. Leslie Fraser

*Margery, Choir members, David, and Deacons are invited to gather on the chancel.*

*Minister:* Let us celebrate the holy work of Margery Heins, who has led our Choir's music ministry for over 25 years.

***All: We give thanks and praise for Margery's ministry with us.***

*Deacon:* Let us recognize Margery's musical gifts--leading our Choir and lifting up music to worship, sing, and dance with God in the deepest places of our spirits and souls.

***All: We give thanks and praise for the music and song that fills our worship.***

*Deacon:* Let us offer our support, prayers, and affirmation of our continuing commitment to this music ministry.

***All:* We pledge our love for the glorious music that fills our church.**

*Deacon:* Let us celebrate music's power to heal, transform, and lift us to realms of communion with God and each other.

***All:* We thank you, Margery, for touching our hearts with the music you bring us.**

*Deacon:* Let us thank God for bringing Margery's talents and gifts to our church.

***All:* We thank God for leading you to Ashfield, for filling our voices with God's love and praise.**

*Deacon:* Let us honor Margery's commitment to filling our worship and lives with music, in hard times and in good, over these many years.

***All:* We thank you for remaining in this music covenant, like a marriage, through the seasons of birth, death, sickness, health, leavings, and beginning again.**

*Deacon:* Let us give Margery a token of our love and esteem with this small gift.

***All:* We know that you will make a joyful noise when you dance through the aisles of Ashfield Hardware.**

*Deacon:* Let us give glory to God for Margery's music ministry, and let us say

***All:* AMEN.**