



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

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, January 30, 2022 “Love Makes Us Complete” Rev. David Jones

Our first reading, from Jeremiah, is the prophet’s call. It adheres to the traditional pattern of these things: God calls the prophet, the prophet demurs or protests, then finally the call is answered and taken up with God’s help. In this particular call, there is this loving moment when God reaches out a hand to Jeremiah, touches him on the mouth. It reminds me of God walking with Adam and Eve in the garden, or Christ held in Mary’s arms. God lives very close to us in some mysterious way. After God does this, God explains that Jeremiah no longer should fear to speak; now the very words of God are within him, and it is God’s words that he will say from now on. Jeremiah has graduated from apprenticeship or training into a full fledged prophet, by gaining confidence. By trusting in God, by giving in to God’s call, Jeremiah has grown up. It is not age or a degree or license, it is not an accumulation of knowledge and facts, that finally transforms us, but a living trust, that who we are, we were meant to be; that what we say, we are supposed to say.

This particular way of authorizing someone to speak on behalf of God is more than a little dangerous. I always felt that in a place like Jacksonville. At our little church on the west side, love meant being open and affirming, like it does here. But at the big churches downtown, love meant something else entirely. Love seemed to mean rejecting other religions, and denying who God made us to be. Personally, I trust the prophets, I trust Jeremiah, I trust teachers like Martin Luther King, Jr., but I’ve never been very good at justifying why I trust them and not others who make the same claim to prophecy. We live in a world with so many different teachings and so many different messages about faith and religion, about what is right and what is wrong. I used to use little tricks, like I would say, well “no *true* Christian would” believe this or that, no true person of faith would do this or that thing. But eventually I realized the people I told myself weren’t true were saying the same thing about me!

In his letter to the Corinthians this morning, Paul suggests there is another way to tell if something is true or not, another way to know if what we are being taught or what we are being encouraged to do in this world should be trusted or not. And that is love. For Paul, love is the measure of all things, big and small. Love is the only thing that moves us from a limited or partial perspective, into a complete one. Love is the only thing that really works in us and through us as if God’s kin-dom of heaven was already here, already fully realized. Things like prophecy, or speaking in tongues, or even having faith—these are the partial things we do in a partial world. These are the things we do to survive, whereas love is what we do to thrive. And so everything else—prophecy, faith, worship, communion—these only have meaning, only have value, when they serve love. If you speak on behalf of God but do so without love in your heart, without love as your goal, then you might as well fall silent. If you come to church and pray, or sit at the Table and eat with your siblings in faith, but you don’t do it with love for yourself and each other, you might as well stay at home. Love makes everything we do count, whereas the absence of love makes everything we do pointless.

But you know, we still have a challenge on our hands. Because lots of people who do things we don’t understand or don’t like or don’t support, they may well believe they are doing those things with love in their heart. And so Paul says more. Paul says love has certain qualities that you can actually feel

and see. In other words, you can't just say that the thing you are doing is because of love, it also has to have the qualities of love. And those qualities are detectable.

If you are doing something that genuinely serves God and that brings meaning to our vision, meaning to our faith—if you are doing something from a place of love—we will be able to see that you do it with patience. Now that's not to say you won't be in a hurry or announce that you're sick and tired of being sick and tired. It means that regardless of how much of a hurry you are in, no matter how convinced the thing you do must be done and done immediately, you will keep doing it no matter what obstacles are laid down in front of you. Martin Luther King was in a hurry and he would say truthful things like "justice delayed is justice denied," and "the time is always right to do what is right." But to defy four hundred years of justice-being-denied, to carry on in doing what he did even though people rejected him in his lifetime, that is the peculiar patience of love. Another way of saying that love is patient is to say that love is courageous, it is determined, and it is unbeatable. Even when it is only achieved in one heart, or a handful, the patience of love means that it will endure all things.

Another way to know love when you see it is that it will be kind. That doesn't mean love is above getting angry, or that its words will never grow sharp, that they will never disturb or offend. It means that even in these forms, the words of love will show the mean and the cruel that those who they judge and mistreat deserve kindness. Love is kind because it gives kindness to those who never get it otherwise. Love is kind to the employee who is yelled at by a supervisor. Love is kind to the person who is excluded because of how they look or how they love. Love is kind to the unhoused, the unemployed, the beaten down and dismissed, pulling up a chair and filling a plate at the Table without question or qualification. How do we know if what someone is doing is really love? It will be kind precisely to those who need a little kindness most. It will be kind to everyone who has ever been made to feel like they aren't good enough in the eyes of this world, because love knows they are more than good enough, they are as good as anyone in the loving eyes of God.

How do we know that love is in control, that love is driving what we do? We will know because the people serving love will not insist on having their own way, which is the way of rudeness and arrogance. Love instead looks for the inclusive way, for the path wide enough and straight enough to be traveled safely by everyone. Love levels the mountains and fills in the valleys, because this world is for all of us not just for the young or the tall, not just for those who walk and climb. This world is for every one of God's children, and a loving path is smooth and includes ramps. The way of love is built for all people, not just for the few who think they are in charge, because God is in charge.

How do we know that love is really love? True love never ends. It never settles for halfway, it never brings its work, its struggle to an end at a compromise, or a solution that works for some but not all. There are things in Martin Luther King's vision that did come to an end. The buses were desegregated, the schools were desegregated. But love doesn't end with legislation or a court ruling; love keeps going and asks, are we really equal in this country today? Love keeps going and asks about our economy, it asks about our foreign policy. It looks down the street after a blizzard and sees whose road has been plowed and whose hasn't. It looks to see who has enough fuel to get through winter, enough wood to burn, enough food to eat, enough dignity and respect at work and in the home. It asks who is doing the dishes and the laundry. It asks who is buying groceries in a pandemic, and who is caring for our children. It asks if the people of Springfield get the same support as the people of Boston. It asks if we get the same support here in the hilltowns.

When we are trying to figure out what are we supposed to do in this world; when we are trying to discern what God's will is for us in Ashfield, here on earth as in heaven; when we want to know which prophet is true, or which teaching is closest to God, we need to remember that God is love. And we are what love became; we, each of us, is the offspring of God's overflowing nature. God is like a potter who creates from clay. The potter is inspired by the creation glimpsed first from imagination. The potter makes us, but *we* are *why* the potter gathers up the earth and sits down to create in the first place! Before we were in the womb God knew each of us; before we were born, God consecrated us. The closer we get to love, the closer the God who is love gets to us.

Sometimes we feel that life is incomplete. That brings many of us to church. And there is a place for scripture and prayer and even a sermon or two. There is a place for hymns and anthems. There is a place for prophecy, and demands for justice. There is a place for assembly, for work, for rest. But these are all partial, a reflection in the mirror, through a glass, darkly. But with love—love that is patient, that is kind, that does not end—we will yet come to see each other face to face. And through the sight and sense of each other, through our diversity and equality, we will look upon our Creator, and we will be complete.

Alleluia and amen.