



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon “The Authority of Love” Rev. David Jones

I listened recently to a conversation that three young men were having. The three of them have known each other for their whole lives, by now they are more like brothers. One of them works as a film editor, one as a paramedic, and the third man as a police officer. And they were talking about the vaccine, about who will get it first and when, and how this will affect others. The film editor was very upset, even offended, by something he'd just learned, that prisoners would be among those to receive the vaccine first. He addressed himself to the police officer in the group: “can you believe that?,” he asked the officer. “Doesn't that just tick you off?” Before the officer could answer, the paramedic intervened, explaining to his friend that it's medically necessary. Many of our prisons have been superspreaders and anyway it puts corrections officers and other staff in as much danger as the prisoners, which in turn puts their families in danger, and therefore the entire community. For the paramedic, this was pretty cut and dry; the vaccine is to stop the spread and begin to return us to our lives and to each other, and there is just no way around that prisoners need to be among the first vaccinated. The film editor was somewhat convinced; he understood the logic of this. But, “Aren't *you* offended that prisoners are getting the vaccine before *you*?” he again asked the officer. The officer answered differently than the film editor was anticipating: “No, I'm not. One of my best friends is a corrections officer. And not everyone in prison belongs there.”

These young men are dear friends of mine. They live and work in Canada, and during the pandemic we have reconnected. As I listened to them, I found myself thinking about how rare it is when the four of us talk that we really find ourselves in this kind of conversation. Normally we are checking in on each other, asking about each other's families, about work. Or we are talking about hockey. I've been enjoying pointing out how good the Habs look this year. And of course we have talked about the pandemic. But this was really the most we'd waded into a conversation like this. We were talking about ethics. I appreciated the knowledge that my paramedic friend brought to this conversation. I appreciated my police officer friend being so honest about how personal this is for him. And I also appreciated the anger of my film editor friend, because I know his father was a police officer. I suspect his anger had more to do with that fact than he was letting on.

I'm sharing this conversation because I think these kinds of conversations are happening all around us right now. I think that, in addition to the grief and hardship, we are living in a moment of intense ethical arguments. The business on Wall Street in the news this past week is another example of how alive--how under scrutiny and up for debate--our social ethics are at this moment. We do not have the benefit of a clear consensus, but find ourselves increasingly divided.

Both of our readings today belong to a very specific time and place and to an altogether different age in our human life. I have to confess that neither of them seemed very nourishing for our life today when I first read them. But I still had this recent conversation on my mind as I began to dig more into Paul's letter.

This reading from First Corinthians sets us down right in the middle of a longer-running conversation between this young church community and their teacher Paul. In our passage there are quotation marks; so Paul is directly responding to a specific issue the community is dealing with, and he is doing so in part by quoting the community's words back to them. And the issue seems to be something like this:

In Corinth, a diverse city of Greeks, Syrians, Egyptians, and a significant Jewish population, a young church of Gentiles and Jews is trying to figure out how to deal with Paul's instruction, from a previous letter, to reject the worship of idols, which was a common religious practice all around them in the city, and a practice that many members of this young faith community would have been accustomed to, having only recently converted to the monotheistic tradition of Israel. Paul instructed the Corinthians to abstain from any and all practices connected to idol worship, including eating the food dedicated in this worship. The Corinthians replied to Paul that, since they themselves already have the knowledge that Paul teaches--the knowledge that the idols others believe in are not real, that what they claim to represent or connect us to is false; the knowledge that there is only one true God--then surely it doesn't matter one way or the other if they eat the food that has been dedicated to this idol or that one. And in fact it may be important that those strong in this knowledge actually do eat the meat of idol worship, to show to those still weak in this knowledge that it is mere superstition, that they will be neither better off nor worse off if they partake in these false ritual practices.

Often in our communities, when we are searching for unity, when we are ironing out new partnerships and trying to achieve goals together, it is very practical questions and habits that trip us up. That's quite normal I think. Fortunately for the Corinthians, rather than get bogged down in the details of this particular issue, Paul is thoughtful enough to seize on this very practical matter to introduce a more transcendent idea; into a divided or broken situation Paul brings a new tool for unity. As Paul explains, while it is true that consuming the food of idol worship really doesn't make a difference, really will not directly benefit or harm a member of this new church community, what does concern him is that knowledge can sometimes lead us away from love. Paul explains to the Corinthians, that though some of you may be possessed of the knowledge of one God, your participation in idol worship may confuse your fellow church members who are still learning and still unsure. Rather than seeing the participation in idol worship as overcoming foolish superstition, it may be perceived as a hedge against the teachings of Paul and Christ. The member strong in knowledge, by being careless in this matter, is prioritizing himself over others. For Paul, this gets faith backwards. For Paul, "the proper object of religious concern is not an abstract truth about God, but those weak believers for whom Christ died" (Laurence Welborn et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*).

Finally now I can hear words fit for our own time. Just because you have the right to eat or not to eat the food offered to a false idol, as a member of a community you have the responsibility not to become a stumbling block for others. According to Paul's teaching, our freedom or liberty is not unlimited, but like Christ's is accountable at all times to the wellbeing of others. Our liberty must be self-limited. No matter how impressive our knowledge is, no matter how perfectly we have unravelled this intricately woven Creation, no matter how precise our theology or philosophy or understanding of the laws of nature--no matter how puffed up our own idea of ourselves may be--it is always love--not knowledge--that faith belongs to. It is always each other's well being that is the animating religious concern. We succeed--are righteous or sinful--according to how faithfully we keep with that concern. And that is the same great authority, or God, that we know stands over us still in this church community today.

I was still listening to my friends, and was kind of caught up in my own thoughts, even just in my surprise at the conversation we were having. I did notice how the difference of opinion about prisoners receiving the vaccine was on its way to being resolved mostly according to logic and science rather than any special regard for the prisoners themselves. But while I was busy noticing this, a fourth dear friend signed on to join us. And as the discussion was rehashed for him, I saw his brow furrowing and his mouth open. He couldn't believe his ears. The medical logic was being explained, the personal concerns

for the safety of colleagues was being voiced--when this friend interrupted sharply. "We should vaccinate prisoners first because they are at risk. They are vulnerable. And I'm sorry but you guys don't know their cases. You don't know what minor thing or major thing that they were arrested and imprisoned for. But surely you do not think that dying helpless from a cruel virus was part of their sentencing." The conversation stopped. We became silent for a moment. I felt our unclean spirits leaving us before this new authority.

I was ashamed I hadn't spoken up sooner like this friend late to the conversation did. I was too busy holding myself apart from my friends, from our little community, analyzing us as if remote from our hearts and the very real stakes of the conversation. But my friend moved me and snapped me back to attention. None of these friends of mine would consider themselves religious and they sometimes tease me a little about being a minister. I get them back by quoting scripture sometimes. But I wanted to respond authentically to my wise friend, who like Paul had lifted our narrow discussion up onto the transcendent plane of justice and love. I thanked him and said that ultimately the question, as Dr. King taught, is not what will happen to me if I go down the dangerous road to Jericho, but rather what will happen to the person already stranded there if I *don't* go? We may have the freedom or the liberty to disregard the dignity and the lives of those who are imprisoned or homeless or unemployed or hungry, but Paul and Christ and the prophetic tradition of Israel are unequivocal: we have the clear *responsibility* to regard them most of all. Because where knowledge can puff us up, it is only love that will build us up. That is the great new authority of love: though liberty must be self-limited by a regard for others, love--by that same regard for others--must become limitless.

Alleluia and amen.