



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

**October 3, 2021** “Whatever Passes Along Our Paths”

Rev. David Jones

Anyone who has preached during a service of Taizé will find themselves confronting the irony of doing so at all. The founder of the Taizé community founded it in part because of his aversion to traditional preaching--so many words, so many complications. It seemed to Brother Roger that the ecumenical Christian community was not well served by sermons, that rather communion, repetitive music, and especially silence was what would open the heart and mind to reconciliation, to companionship, and to the binding, universal love that--like Nancy's string--is connecting us at all times. Too many words make it difficult to focus, to sit and really feel where we sit, whereas gentle music, a piece of bread, the quiet, vast space of silence, alerts us to precisely where we sit.

I was tempted not to speak at all, to instead reserve this time in the service for a prolonged silence. But our lectionary readings today are not so simple. They include fraught words like “dominion” and “subjection,” breadcrumbs of a dangerous idea--an assumption--that so many Christians have made, that, though God created all things, it is to the human creature uniquely that God has given all power and authority to use as they see fit; an assumption that the world is ours to devour, to consume until we alone are big and strong. That is not what our scripture says this morning, but these words “dominion” and “subjection”, without any context, without any reflection, haunt those of us who love the earth and the monarchs and the swaying trees and the falling leaves.

So with apologies to Brother Roger, I will say a few more words. Today the author of Hebrews quotes from Psalm 8, repeating the notion that a divine Creator, having created, now looks to us, to humankind, to emulate the Creator's work. Where the Creator has made everything--all things on earth, but also the planets and the stars, time and space themselves--the Creator has also gently invited us to participate in this vast creative work right here on earth. The Hebrew word translated in English as “dominion” in our Psalm is *mashal*, and it does mean ‘to have dominion’ or ‘to rule,’ but several other Hebrew words have this meaning too. So we need to be more precise: why the word *mashal* instead of another? Because *mashal* means ruling *by making order from chaos*, like God did by creating life where there was none. God invites us into *this* kind of rule in our relationship to the created earth, to be creative in nurturing life. The same way God gave the stars and the moon to foster the life and the dignity of the night sky, so are we invited to do the same with all that crosses our paths. And this is no small thing for the Psalmist to mention the moon and stars, to compare humans to the celestial bodies. Because we must remember that Israel is a desert nation and the God of Israel is a God of the desert, a dangerous place. The moon and stars remind us that God's dominion--God's method of ruling--is to set a guiding light into the darkness. God's dominion is Creation, and creation is creative service to life; the life of the moon gives life to those like us who wander this earth.

The Creator invites us to have a kind of compassionate and dutiful dominion over the sheep and oxen and whatever creatures are along our path, that is *like* the moons over the creatures of the dark that travel in the path of its light. Like the moon, our dominion should be creative, it should serve life especially where it is hard or unlikely; like the moon it should be constant, reliable, be hope in places of despair.

The Psalmist asks, why is the Creator mindful of us? But the Psalmist already knows: the Creator is mindful of us because the Creator is mindful of the sheep and oxen, the birds and all that swim. If we do

not do our part, they cannot have theirs; since we have been dignified by God, we are invited to dignify *whatever* passes along our paths. To receive this charge to join God in creatively nurturing all life we cross paths with, is to receive a sacred trust. God yearns to be discovered in all things, in the moons and stars of this universe, in the people of Israel and the people of the world, in the monarch butterflies and crickets, in the chickens and cows of the field, owls and coyotes, by day and by night. Our purpose is to recognize this loving God, to give God the same thrill of being alive here and now that God gives to us.

The Letter to the Hebrews is another wordy and complicated text; I would like to return to silence and to music, to simple communion. So let us just hear this simple verse about this teacher and child of God named Jesus: this letter tells us that Jesus was not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters, to call us siblings under God, equal partners in the dominion of humankind. Not ashamed of any person, no matter how difficult their life has been, no matter how they have suffered--this is crucial. By contrast, to have dominion in the wrong sense, to dominate, to kill, to waste, to throw away, to dismiss and discard--this is to be deeply ashamed of God's Creation. To pay no mind to the dignity of the illuminating sky, to step on the wildflowers, to destroy ecosystems, is to believe on some level that God has created meaningless things, that God is a poor Creator. While we are remembering that this is not what our scripture teaches us--while we are worshipping and praising God, and pledging ourselves to our part in the witness of God, in serving the enjoyment of life *by God's self* in our midst and all around us--we must also remember that God has not made a meaningless person. God did not make some nations more dignified than others, more deserving or capable; God did not make some people bosses and others workers, God did not make races and set them against each other, God did not make young and old, God did not make gay and straight, God did not make rich and poor. God made humankind, God made Life, and God was so enamoured with each of us, that God put a moon and a sun over us all. "Why does God care about us?" Why shouldn't God? Didn't God make us? Didn't God's love bubble up and over and make us all exactly as we are? In the great tradition of our scriptures, the author of the letter to the Hebrews and our Psalmist remind us that dignity abounds and food abounds and life abounds--it is only justice, it is only dominion like the kind God yearns for, that we do not yet see.

Let fewer words help us to see it this morning.

Alleluia and amen.