



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

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**Rev. David Jones, Minister**

**Sermon      November 13, 2022      Rev. Ann Hallstein      “The Gift of Church”**

Going to church is one of the more peculiar things we do in this life. We sing hymns about a just and peaceful world that we are unlikely to ever see, we say things we can't prove about a divine being we can't see, and we probably all have friends who wonder why we don't just go for brunch instead. Good question—why not? I can think of some reasons right away, and imagine you can too.

We have just come through one of the worst election seasons in memory. We are constantly barraged with anxiety-provoking news, disastrous storms and wild fires that cost enormous amounts of money to recover from, institutions that are failing us, on and on. Where are we to find something not only to provide some solidity, solace and comfort, but which *inspires us*, moves us to action, fills the spirit and buoys it up such that we can relax and be lifted to a better place-- and I don't mean heaven! I mean a place where our souls can connect to that which is deep and nourishing and mysterious and challenging, and be moved to *live from that place*.

I submit to you that that place can be church. *Can* be, but only we, together, acting under God's leadings, are the ones to make it so. Together, gathering here for an hour or two a week in worship and many more for the work of the church, we dedicate ourselves to making God manifest in the world. Our purpose here is to *steward spirit*—our collective spirit, as well as our individual ones--towards becoming bigger, brighter, deeper, more generous, more connected to God, and more a part of our daily life.

Stewardship of spirit, and the sharing of resources, is our *response* to bearing the imprint of God, gathering together in community, recognizing the importance of our faith, and supporting this modest but lively institution that shepherds souls and works towards the common good. If we agree that such stewardship is a fundamental role of church that comes along with saying yes to living in and from God, well, then, we must work to support that agreement with our resources: our time, our talents, our money, because we will indeed reap what we sow, as Paul pointed out to the church at Corinth. His 2000 year-old words of wisdom are as true today as they were then. Whatever we put in will be returned, sparingly or generously. What do you want from this church? How much are you willing to put into it?

Clearly, I can't answer that for any particular individual, but I do by now have a sense of what many people want from their church, having been in and around so many. We want to stop for an hour in worship together and lift our eyes to the hills. If we are distracted by a health problem or work or from just having heard the latest news, we want someone or something to grab us by the shoulders and turn us from where we were when we came in, and so that we can leave from a better place.

We want to be a part of an enlivening community, and to be known: known to others, known to God. And we want to use ourselves on God's behalf, whether that be gathering and distributing food to the hungry, educating ourselves to systemic racism, working for climate justice, or visiting someone who is

home bound or ill. We want a place to celebrate and mark life's milestones together, a place to gather our prayers, as well as a place where we can be sad and cry openly. We want to be tethered to something foundational and true, something that will be here throughout our lives and usher us out when that time comes. And usher new beings like Hugo into a loving, supportive community in which to grow and be held by.

Most of us are just not strong enough to do this thing called life solo. We need reinforcement to get it even close to right. We need what we do here *together*, in God's sight. *We can only be church together.* There are, of course, good people with generous hearts and solid values who never darken the door of a church. But for those of us who do come to church, we *do so intentionally*. In entering here, and in making a commitment to be a part of this community, we are *intentionally* making choices about how we use our precious lives and the resources we have.

Someone who made a split second choice about her resources was a woman getting off the subway in New York city. The station's crowded, and as she exits the train she realizes she is holding only one of her gloves. She looks back into the car and sees the matching one on the seat, but it's too late to rush back in and retrieve it. Suddenly, as the doors begin to close, she flings out her arm, and tosses the remaining glove on to the seat alongside its mate. The doors shut, and the train pulls away.

It sounds like a spur of the moment gesture. But that woman must have lived a life of generosity to be able to think and act so quickly, to know what would benefit someone right then and there. She gave without thinking, because her generosity of spirit was just who she was.

Closer to home, I think of an evening when Nancy and I were having dinner at Joe's Pizza, and two women sitting next to us who had never been there before asked us for recommendations. They had come to celebrate the retirement of one of them. We told them our favorites, chatted some, and when we asked for our bill, Rene, the waitress, told us they had paid for our meal. We were profoundly grateful for their act of generosity, which felt like a blessing. The heart of generosity filled our hearts that evening, and continues to do so whenever we call up that memory.

Through this church we can bless the world. Through this church, we will reap what we sow. When we enter here, we show that we know *there is no church of oneself*. We come here because we can ONLY be church, do church, *together*. There is no church of oneself. This church is a gift, to each and everyone here, from each and everyone here. Through generous giving to support this community, it will continue to bless us. May it be so, for those of us who are here now, and for the generations to come.

Alleluia and amen.