



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

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sermon November 20, 2022 Rev. David Jones “Let Your Gentleness Be Known”

I think it was around 6 or 7pm on my son’s (!) birthday, that I realized I had left some unfinished business with our Stewardship Committee. This excellent committee, that has met year-round and talked to us and engaged us all year-long on the subject of stewardship, that planned out meticulously who would write something and when for “Wendy’s Weekly Update”, who would share an anecdote or a perspective on giving to our church on a Sunday, even who would preach about stewardship if I happened to be on parental leave when Stewardship Sunday rolled around—*everything* was organized and carefully arranged in every respect by this great group. But, there was one catch. Every year when we reach out to our church community, near and far, about supporting this church, we like to include a letter from the pastor.

Now for better and worse, I like to write letters, and I can write, I think, and as we know from our worship together these past three years, I can even write longer than I should write. I give Bruce a headache most weeks, as he tries to construct a bulletin on one sheet of paper that includes a prayer of invocation that I’ve written personally. And despite every year being asked to write a brief, one page pastoral letter, I like to submit to this stewardship committee a letter that is exactly a little longer than one page, just to keep things interesting.

And there is another thing: for better and worse, as Margery and John know, as my Deacons know, I am a bit of a procrastinator. I will get my letter written—and it will be longer than requested—but it will be finished and submitted not a moment too soon. My fellow procrastinators know that this is a wise and studied approach, it allows us to keep our options open, and it allows us to be topical. I may not be one of these modern and stylish preachers who bound across the chancel as they speak, but you won’t catch me talking to you on a Sunday about something that happened on a Wednesday.

And so it went with my pastoral letter. My wise and long-winded approach to writing had paid off again, and I was able to write to you with the fresh glow of fatherhood—through blurry, exhausted eyes—with as deep a gratitude as I had ever felt.

But it was not exactly gratitude for Hugo or for Caity. That was part of it. Caity was incredible! And Hugo was brave. Unlike his father, he did not procrastinate. Of course I am grateful for my amazing little family. And I am grateful for my mother and father-in-law, who decided to come a few days earlier than they planned, just on the off chance that Caity would go into labor early. We were having dinner with them when the time came. Actually we were *just about* to sit down for dinner, when the time came. We did sit down and eat, but it was more like we sat down and *pretended* to eat. I’ll never forget that meal.

My parents-in-law are staying at the house next to our sibling church, Charlemont Federated, in what used to be their parsonage. Of course I am grateful to have had Caity’s parents with us that night, and since, to help us navigate these first sweet days of new life. And now grateful to have Anna, Hugo’s aunt, here with us; grateful in advance, for his aunt Michelle and uncle Todd and my parents, who have been so supportive from back in Canada and can’t wait to meet him.

But, with love and respect for all these family members, the gratitude I tried to write about in this year’s pastoral letter was not really this gratitude. It was gratitude for a midwife named Liza, and a nurse named Mariel, and for a pediatrician whose name I recognized from the names of her children

who have attended this church. I was overwhelmed with gratitude for every nurse and support staff that we met. We felt so thoroughly cared for, mind, body, and spirit. Really the days we spent at Baystate Franklin were among the happiest of my life.

From this place of gratitude, and in trying to express my thanksgiving in a letter, reflecting on it, I also found myself remembering my time serving as a student chaplain in Springfield. And I remembered meeting and speaking with people at the hospital who had not been so well cared for. I remembered sitting with a grieving family, and I saw and overheard hospital staff criticizing and judging how this family was grieving, just because it was different from what they were used to. My own thanksgiving, the expression of it in this letter, ended up connecting me to some lingering frustration and anger, when I have seen people mistreated.

I told a story once about working at UPS, and as a union rep, representing a young coworker. He had been the victim of racist verbal abuse by a supervisor, and he asked me to work with him on a grievance. He had gone to underfunded schools with overworked and underpaid teachers, and he lived in a part of Jacksonville that was neglected by the city. It was a redlined community, over-policed and under-served by public transit (we learned a little about redlined communities from Ann and Virginia at our last racial justice discussion). And so, through no fault of his own, but by the design of an unjust city, this young coworker of mine never learned to read or to write. If there was ever a young man who deserved justice, it was him, and yet when I delivered his grievance to our union hall, I knew his grievance would go unheard. The powerful men at the union hall, just like the ones in management, couldn't be bothered to care for a young man like this. I am thankful for all that I have, all that my family has, but I am angry for what we don't have in this country.

So giving thanks is a complicated thing. And Thanksgiving is a complicated day in this country. For some people, it is finally a welcome day of rest, a day off from a miserable job. For most of us gathered today, it is a feast day, a day, despite the world around us, to intentionally orient ourselves, our minds, body, and spirit toward God, the Creator and only true sovereign of the land; it is a day to be surrounded by family or friends. It may also be a good day to be heartsick, to dare to take some time to grieve for someone long past, someone who represented in your life the same newness, the same fierce pull, that Hugo now has on Caity and me.

And for Indigenous people, who stewarded this land for 13,000 years before any congregationalist ever set foot here, it is a day of mourning. For David Brule, president of the Nolumbeka Project, who will join us after this service for a talk about indigenous history on this land, it is precisely the complexity of this holiday, the thanksgiving and the grief—and the reciprocal relationship between these two things, or rather the potential relationship between these two things—that, maybe, just maybe, makes a future new life possible at all.

The reading from John today speaks about the bread from heaven, which is synonymous with the bread of true life. Without any context, this reading can seem problematic, in the face of the complexity of our honest history on this land. Without context, this kind of passage can form the basis for the notion that Christianity is the unique and only path to spiritual and material fulfillment. This notion is as dangerous a notion as you can find in religion, and finds its expression in colonial history in something called the Doctrine of Discovery, which provided Church sanction for the violence of conquest and domination that we perpetuate to this day.

But in context, recalling the ancestors and the manna or bread from heaven that sustained them in their long journey through the wilderness—recalling the oppressed Hebrews who God liberated from slavery—we know that in this passage Jesus is simply teaching that there is a false bread, a false way of life that is selfish and violent, and there is a true way, a way of community and mutuality; Jesus means there is a way of privation and scarcity, and there is a way of gentleness and abundance.

As we look ahead to a feast, among family and friends and neighbors, with bright eyes for the future and heavy hearts for what has passed; with thanksgiving for all that the Creator gives us, and mourning for all that some men have stolen, let's resolve to go the right way; let's let our gentleness be known. The gentleness of a Liza or a Mariel. The gentleness of a child's first cries. The gentleness of fond

memories for those you will acutely miss this week. The gentleness of our songs, and of our hopes that all people one day be cared for and cherished as children forever to the God who made them. May we have a happy thanksgiving and a good rest, to strengthen us in our listening and learning for the work of reconciliation still ahead. And may we all know that the God Who Is Love is always near.

Alleluia and amen.