



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

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sermon December 4, 2022 Rev. David Jones “Contradictions and Imagination”

Which is it? Will the wolf live with the lamb, or will an unquenchable fire burn the chaff? Are truly all welcome, or are some, like the Pharisees, to be turned away? What is the true peace that the bright spirit of Advent promises in our darkening winter days?

I was reminded of something on Friday by a comment one of our Church Council members made as we began to eat lunch together.

It was from a time when I was a lot younger, maybe 19 years old, maybe younger than that. I had watched an animal rights documentary late at night, alone in my dorm room. It was an intense, deadly serious film, and I was moved to tears by it. I was determined, resolved, after I watched it, to never eat meat again. I went to sleep with a great sense of urgency, ready to wake up to a radically new way of being.

The next day a friend arrived to pick me up for a brunch date at some restaurant in Ottawa. We settled in and the waiter came to take our order, and of course I had these awful images from the film still playing in my head.

But I was also very hungry and the smell of breakfast meat was very powerful. I panicked and ordered eggs and sausage.

As the waiter left with my order, I felt terrible. I was conflicted. This was all wrong, “remember what you saw last night” I told myself, “remember the promises you made.” When my meal arrived, I looked down at my plate and despaired. I took a bite of the sausage and was instantly queasy: I had made a grave mistake. I had mortally sinned. I set my knife and fork down, sunk back in the booth, and hung my head down in shame and regret. I was lost, to myself and to my God.

A few minutes later my stomach growled and I remembered how much I love breakfast sausage, and remembering my old strength, I ate my meal like some martyr but without a cause. I felt bad about it, realizing how my ideas and my actions did not align the way Gandhi taught that they should, when a defiant bit of poetry, a line from Walt Whitman rose up within me:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

For those among us who are much stronger than I was then, and much stronger than I am now, who do not eat meat, this is not a funny story. But I would guess there is something in all our lives where we fall short, maybe very short, maybe even in a harmful and destructive way. This is how we can worship together in this place, vegetarians and vegans alongside meat eaters like myself. It is not a matter of compromising what we believe in, and it is not even a matter of tolerating someone who we disagree with. It is a matter of humility and perspective. It is a matter of remembering that no one among us is perfect. Even the most upright and least self-contradictory people, the most authentically righteous and morally consistent, end up understanding (or reckoning with the fact) that they remain human, they remain members of a shared community, and there is the same inescapable complicity that we all must grapple with.

Now this can be a slippery slope. Since it is not possible to be perfect, there is a temptation to not even try to be better. There is a temptation to not value others around us as moral examples, as teachers, who have achieved something we have not. We have to guard against that. At the same time, realizing that individual behavior can never be perfect, and can never by itself change the world, liberates us from taking everything onto our own shoulders, or despairing when we trip up or stumble and fall short of something we set out for. Do we often contradict ourselves in our faith and in our morality, in our participation in this broken and beautiful world? Very well then, we are large and contain multitudes.

With a more balanced self-assessment in hand, and with the freedom from overwhelming distress or guilt that comes with it, we are able to enter into relationships with others and think creatively and constructively, and tackle big, impactful things together. We are able to encourage and support one another, and not get stuck on imperfections or mistakes.

Our goal as a church, what we are called to do, is to serve real people in the real world, it is not to judge each other and sort each other into categories of good and bad. I do believe, and I think we rightly believe, that there is such a thing as right and wrong, but that is very different than putting a human being, a soul among us, forever into a category of good or bad. If we do that, eventually—since none of us are perfect—we will find that even this lovely church community here in Ashfield only has the bad, imperfect people, which doesn't help us accomplish much at all. Rather, we should embrace humility and extend grace, and begin from a place of what we have in common, and how we can do big things together that we could never do alone. We should not weaken ourselves with exacting individual standards; we should strengthen each other with compassionate cooperation.

But this still leaves us with the contradictions in our scripture readings this morning. Is God's peace a place of such transformation that the wolf and leopard and lion will become cheerful vegetarians, friendly gatherers not hunters who live with lambs and walk with children? Or does God's peace bring a winnowing judgment that renders some wheat and some chaff, some worthy fruit and some a brood of vipers?

These images, these metaphors, the tone of the language in our scriptures today, do not give the full meaning of these prophecies. What Isaiah is describing, what John anticipates, is an utterly new world, a creation that the present order of things would think is impossible. It is not that the lion will literally follow a small child. It is that our world will be so transformed that today, from the present perspective, we have to resort to an impossible image in order to illustrate how totally new and wholly different the future will be. Advent is a season not only of expectation, not only of anticipation, but of disruptive imagination. It is a jarring season, when a lowly, pregnant woman will be revealed to be the bearer of a new kind of king for a new kind of kingdom. Where today we have a world of antagonism and hostility and violence, the world we will live in *in the future*, according to God, is a world of harmony and peace and equality. What is impossible to express today will nonetheless come to be.

So the point of these images is to say just that, the contradiction that exists is between the present conditions of society and the future ones; the contradiction is between what we think is natural and what God will make to be natural. Advent is about using our imaginations to draw us toward God's *justice*. And justice, true justice, will be a peace like a place we can't yet fathom, like a place where wolves and sheep live together, where great and fearsome lions could fall-in line behind a small child. And *this* is why John turns away some people. It is not that they can never join us, but rather, they have to arrive or enter ready to rethink everything. This is what John says, that we must all repent. This word means to 'turn in another direction' or to think again, it means a change in character or essence. Entry into a community *of* the future requires only and simply this, a willingness to *live for* the future.

When I was sitting in that booth at the restaurant, I had the false idea of repentance as this individual moral contest, I was almost trying to save myself—and only myself—by feeling bad or remorseful. But, of course that did not help the animals that are treated inhumanely by our industrial food system. If I showed up to the Jordan to be baptized by John thinking like that, the way I was, thinking that right and wrong are categories of good and bad for sorting individuals, he would have

turned me away also. Because I would be showing up with the same thinking that gets us into trouble in the first place, that same selfish notion of morality or righteousness, that leads us astray. But today, I show up here—and we show up here—ready to listen and learn from each other, ready to think about Creation and to see it in a new light, and ready to be baptized and to follow others who know more about the things we can do to make our world a little fairer, a little more just. I am no more perfect than when I was 19, but I am humbler, and therefore more useful to my community.

And in this, a pleasant thing happens through no action or merit of my own. A peace washes over me. A peace washes over us all when we sit for just a moment, whether on Sunday or another day of the week, whether in church or at a committee retreat, and remember and accept that we are as God made us, and we belong to one another, and the spirit of Advent upon us is endlessly bright. And this church is for anyone and everyone who arrives ready and eager for the future, where anything and everything will be possible, where an impossible peace awaits us.

Alleluia and amen.