



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

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, February 20, 2022 Sermon “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt”

Rev. David Jones

Recently a friend of mine reached out, out of the blue. It took her a little while to say so, but she was dealing with some really heavy stuff in her family life, and I think under the guise of curiosity and reconnecting, she needed a friend who she trusted but not one who was too close to her now, socially or geographically. We haven't seen each other in probably ten years, and we only met and spent time together for about a year and a half in Ottawa, when I was in grad school and she was in college. We became really good friends, and probably kept in touch for a little while just in the easy, passive ways of social media after I moved to Toronto, but then that stopped too. She eventually moved far away from Ottawa herself. Anyway, she needed a friend from another time, and from another place, to carve out a sanctuary from what she was dealing with.

I have found myself reflecting on our friendship a little bit, and on that time of my life in Ottawa. I had graduated from a pretty traditional liberal arts program and was studying international affairs, and I had a student placement with the Canadian government. I wasn't convinced I was on the right path, but I was confident about the path, it felt respectable, I had some pride in it. And she was in college studying something called 'critical theory,' and I really had no idea what that meant. I met her through a mutual friend and we got along easily right away. But right from the beginning, she was different from any other friend I had.

I had grown up in a fairly political household. My dad and his brothers debated government policy at the dinner table every holiday. And so I always paid attention to elections and to each party's platform. I followed the news generally, I always wanted to vote and then did vote when I was old enough. But this new friend of mine was *really* political. She told me about how the books I had been assigned in school reflected a certain ideology, how the movies I liked reinforced dominant narratives, how even the words I used to communicate were often *inherently* political even though I didn't know it.

I didn't actually ask about any of these things, but she told me about them anyway. And she taught me about Canadian history but it wasn't the history I remembered being taught in school or in my liberal arts degree. She talked about how white people are racist, whereas people of color could not be racist, that wasn't how racism worked. She explained my white privilege to me, my gender privilege—I had no idea how privileged I was or that I could be privileged in so many different ways. My friend was very passionate about these things, and as a young, Asian-Canadian woman, she had good reason to be. She had experienced discrimination, she had experienced being overlooked, being stereotyped.

We made an interesting pair, too, because I was big and she was small. When there was a party or when a bunch of us got together for dinner, she explained these same things to many people, sometimes to people who didn't know her as well as I did. And in those cases, sometimes her teachings turned into arguments, and sometimes those arguments turned into shouting matches. And without fail, in the battle, she would climb onto a chair or a table, to make herself big.

At first as I got to know her, it frustrated me that she always felt a need to teach me. And I would go home and relay some of my latest lessons to my roommate, Mike, and he would laugh and wonder why on earth I was keeping such company. But he knew her a little too, and, even though we were

defensive and questioned her methods, we admired her. I don't remember admitting it at the time, but she was teaching me. She was teaching me a lot. I enjoyed our friendship. Her efforts and methods were blunt but sincere. But I did wonder, how could she go on like this? How could every movie or dinner or comment become so political, how could the stakes always be so high over even the littlest things?

I don't wonder about that anymore. Because toward the end of our time together in Ottawa, we sat together and she explained something to me. Objectively speaking, in both our history in Canada and in our present, I was in an important way, her enemy. I was not her greatest enemy or her most urgent one. But even as I was her friend, my insistence at that time in my life, in certain assumptions I made about race, about gender and sexuality, about what mattered and what didn't matter, I was playing a part in preserving a culture, in upholding social norms, in reinscribing an economic pattern, that backed her and so many others like her against a wall. Her future was not as open as mine, her possibilities, her hopes—her identity—were not as valid, could not be as real, as mine could, not in the world that we were living in. Even in our friendship, I was white, she was not; I was more Canadian, she was less; my feelings of affection and love and desire were *normal*, hers were not. I didn't mean to be, but I was her enemy.

And she loved me anyway. And she did all of this, all of this teaching, lecturing, pulling at every thread, criticizing every word, never backing down from any argument, making herself big for a fight at a party, in order to love everyone who was standing in the way of justice for her. This might seem like a peculiar way to love, but it is the peculiar love for one's enemy. And finally, once I understood this—once I confessed this, once I stopped denying the presence of race and gender in our friendship—then we could begin to stop being enemies. Because I could join her saying so, with my words and my heart in real solidarity, that, yes, in a real way she and I were enemies, then through love, one day we would not be. One day we would sit together and though her skin color would be different than mine, race would no longer divide us. One day we would sit together and though her gender and sexuality would be different than mine, such things would not divide us. We already sat together, and she said to me, like Joseph to his brothers, "I am your sister, who you oppressed;" and because of this—this vulnerability and honesty—we could become siblings without oppression. We could reconcile.

That felt true when she reached out to me after so long recently. There was no teaching anymore, no defensiveness on my part anymore. And our friendship was not in the past, it was present, along with mutual curiosity, support, care, and love. My enemy, who loved me, set me free from being her enemy. Because in all those conversations, all that wrestling with ideas and history and meaning, she never wanted to distress me or make me angry; she only wanted to preserve my life, with hers. Neither she nor I had created these sources of division—we were neither's greatest enemy—but nonetheless these divisions were really there, and they had to be overcome if our relationship was to fulfill its potential. Because that's the way oppression and racism and prejudice work. In closing off someone else's life or an entire nation or people's life, you close life off from yourself. If others cannot be all that they can be, you can't be either, that is just written into the code of Creation, that is just how God inscribed God's covenant on our heart: all with each other, not one on our own. Loving your enemy is a process of becoming strong and fulfilled, and it positions us to have the strength to love still another, greater enemy, like water becoming mighty as it rolls down a mountain.

In the Gospel according to Luke—in both our passage today and the challenging one we read last Sunday, which form one sermon—Jesus alerts us to a greater enemy for the diverse peoples of 1st century Palestine. Last week, Luke's Jesus said, "blessed are you who are poor," and "woe to you who are rich." He doesn't say blessed are you who are poor and work hard, or blessed are you who are poor and who believe the right thing or have the right attitude; he doesn't say, woe to you are rich but are mean about it, or you who are rich only by cheating or taking advantage. He addresses all who are poor without distinction and those few who are rich without distinction. The blessing and the woe-ing, are his way of teaching that these two kinds of people in his audience must come to know and confess to one another that they are each other's great enemies. But the sermon does not end on that troubling score.

Still preaching today, he says "to you that listen" -- poor *and* rich—he has these commandments for us all: love your enemies. Because, for Jesus, we all remain *people*, we all remain children of God,

who can yet work together through a process of love, to begin, slowly but surely, to be enemies no longer. Jesus' audience is divided, they are ensnared by their social context in an antagonist, economic relationship. This is the great plague on the countryside and in the city and at the temple in 1st century Palestine. But all who listen can yet overcome this situation that divides us.

But how? How do the rich and poor find their way back to one another, how do they reconcile? If last week Jesus made it clear that regardless of their individual behavior or attitude, that the rich and the poor find themselves to be enemies, the reading today instructs us in the ways forward. Beyond his commandment to "love your enemies," Jesus issues two others: "do good," and "lend (to one another), expecting nothing in return." Each commandment is intimately related. To illustrate that loving your enemy is more faithful and more profound than loving those you already love, he asks "what *credit* is it to you," to love who it is easy to love, or to lend when you know you will get a good return back. He speaks of the outcomes of love and goodness and assesses their validity, using an economic term, the term "credit". He subverts the order of the world around him, that encourages lending for profit rather than lending without seeking a return, by associating love and righteousness with doing the reverse. Jesus is instructing us to lend without regard to merit or favor. The word can also be translated as "grace," and grace is not true if it is only given conditionally, when it is earned. Grace is not grace if it must be deserved. This is the balm in Gilead and on the Plain, the good news to the masses of poor and struggling people he loves so much: love of your economic enemy is true goodness. And through things like forgiveness of debts, through lending without interest or return, through sharing and mercy and freely giving, we can end our unnecessary suffering, we can break cycles of resentment and abuse, and, by some miracle, our reward on earth as in heaven will be even greater than it is now, even for those few of us who are rich.

Like Joseph looking at his dismayed brothers, like my friend looking at me, Jesus looks on the poor and the rich, upon the divided children of God, and simply tells the truth about our relationships to one another. For Jesus—and for us today—love can not only preserve our lives through reconciling us to our friends and family; it can also reconcile us across race and class.

And that is why Jesus confidently stood in the synagogue when he first announced his ministry, saying surely "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and [...] to let the oppressed go free..."

On sacred ground, let this scripture be fulfilled in our hearing this morning.

Alleluia and amen.