



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

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, February 27, 2022 Sermon “The Future Belongs to Us” Rev. David Jones

I want to begin by being candid: focusing on scripture and what it tells us about racial justice has not been easy in a week when we have seen conventional war break out in Europe—and I say Europe, because, frankly, it is not clear to me right now that this war will be limited to Ukraine. We pray that it is limited, and that it is short lived, but it is obviously a very dangerous, unpredictable moment. I know I am not the only one who has had trouble concentrating (and sleeping) this past week, from all that we have seen.

One thing I saw yesterday was an image, alleged to be four young Ukrainian women, teachers, holding rifles. But they weren't holding them up or over their heads like you sometimes see soldiers posing for a picture; they weren't holding them with certainty or with rage. Instead the guns hung heavily at their sides, and they looked desperately frightened. Many westerners online, a long ways away from the conflict, were quick to applaud the women's bravery for volunteering. But these commentators seemed confused to me. There is no such thing as volunteering *during* an invasion. Either these teachers were forced by the threat of the invading army or they were forced—conscripted—by their own government. In either case, they suddenly found themselves doing the last thing they wanted to be doing. So there was nothing to celebrate in this image.

Pictures like this, taken in the fog of war, cannot tell us anything specific about what is unfolding, they can only give us snapshots of chaos, confusion, fear; they can only capture a sudden and traumatizing loss of control over one's entire life. It is too soon to know and to understand what is happening. But it is not too soon to be reminded that war *itself* is a crime. Young Ukrainian teachers have more in common with Russian teachers, and more in common with Caitly or any teacher at Sanderson or Hawlemont or BSE, than they have in common with their leaders. It is a crime to turn teachers into soldiers.

This week there has been a breathlessness in the reporting on the war whether on cable news, in newspaper headlines, or on social media, that is very troubling. If we are not careful, even something so dangerous can become entertaining. We can easily find ourselves in a rush to applaud courage or to eulogize sacrifice as if we were cheering for characters in an action movie, instead of taking the necessary time to try and understand how this could have happened at all. And I'm not blaming anyone for that, it is not any one person's fault. We live in a world where CNN, for instance, can in one moment be solemnly broadcasting the awful sound of air raid sirens in Kyiv, and be cutting to a commercial for Applebee's in the next. So of course the way we consume the news misleads us.

In fact, that thought began to bring me back to the task at hand today, to think about the good fight for racial justice in the world. Because the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world right now is not in Ukraine, though you would understandably reach that conclusion from the news. But we know and have known that the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world right now is in Afghanistan. And if it is not in Afghanistan, it is in Yemen. Both countries right now have tens of millions of people who do not have

the shelter or the food to survive the weeks and months ahead. And their situation is also the result of war, of air strikes and sanctions; their situation should be no less newsworthy, yet obviously it is. And that's true of the Sudan, of Somalia, of Syria, all places dealing with war and poverty, like Ukraine. And actually in Somalia it is our bombs that are falling from the sky; in Yemen it is the bombs of Saudi Arabia, one of our closest allies. But these places are not in Europe; their people do not look "European."

I do not mean to compare crises, or to draw a false equivalence; obviously there are clear reasons for paying so much attention right now to Ukraine. There are dimensions to this particular crime that especially demand it. But, just speaking for myself—grappling with events in our world *while* knowing the focus of our worship today: if I was shown an image of young, frightened teachers in Syria, would I be as quick to think of Caity? Would I as quickly recognize that we have more in common as working people than we have ever had in common with our respective leaders? There are many more humanitarian crises happening right now in the global south than in Europe, including ones we have been directly involved in. Yet living here, as a Canadian citizen and as a resident in the US—and watching and reading *our* news—I am able to think about them a lot less. And as a result, it is harder to empathize, it is harder to care, it is harder to pay attention.

We each lead busy lives and have struggles of our own. Some of us face great challenges every day. We have to accept the news as it comes. And so we have learned this week to respect Ukrainian sovereignty—rightly so—and we have learned over time to disrespect Palestinian sovereignty. Through our news we learn that some people matter, and some people don't. We learn to hear certain voices and to filter the others out. For example, there are over 800 million people in the world going hungry every day, suffering the terrible effects of malnutrition. The vast majority live and work in the global south, in countries of color. Meanwhile, we produce, as a global community, more than enough to guarantee that not a single person should go without a meal. But we do not hear the voices of all those who do go without, either because they are not brought to us by our journalists and our broadcasters, or because we have judged them and dismissed them before they even had a chance to speak.

Sadly this is not a new situation. In scripture today we read about the ancient Israelites, who, when they were enslaved in Egypt, would have been counted among the hungry and desperate of that time. And no doubt, the equivalent of the news media and the policy makers in Pharaoh's court had many breathless reports and urgent decisions to make about the rivals to Egypt, but they never spared a thought, never inclined an ear, to the Hebrew laborers. There was no scandal in Egypt about this. To worry about rivals was practical because they posed a threat to the world order, were a challenge to Egypt's power, whereas to worry about the poor and the hungry was not necessary. Whether the poor and the hungry remained poor and hungry or not didn't have any geopolitical importance. Pharaoh would have to make crucial decisions about the deployment of troops or the balance of payments in Egypt's trade relations, whereas any unrest at the slave worksites could be violently put down. After all, the condition of slavery was simply the Hebrews' lot, it's what the gods had made them for, they were natural laborers. It was their honor, surely, to contribute in their small, menial way to the greatness of Egypt.

But as we know, Pharaoh's court had it all wrong. The truth was the reverse. It was the geopolitics of Egypt and its rivals that were inconsequential; their rivalry was a crime compared to the justice of God. What really mattered, despite what so many had been led to believe, was precisely the Hebrews, and any nation or people being oppressed and exploited. All along it was they who God most loved, they who God yearned to set free. And finally in Moses, God found a leader of the people, who could help God to lift every voice, to hear the voices that hadn't been heard, and to unite the Hebrew laborers who sometimes bickered or disagreed into one people, into one voice powerful enough to loose the bonds of injustice. God made a mockery of Pharaoh's worldly kingdom and brought the kingdom of God crashing down on Egypt, until finally the seas parted, and the Hebrews escaped to the wilderness.

And it was there in the wilderness, at Mount Sinai, that Moses—trusted by God and trusted by the people—could uniquely look on the glory of God, and climb back down the mountain with commandments that could make out of Israel “a realm of priests and a holy nation.” Moses and the people had been heard by God, and the oppressed nations all over the world had cause for fresh hope. The land of this earth did not belong to Pharaoh after all, it belonged to God, and it is promised to God’s people. And on God’s land, every working person is one of God’s own people, so they will eat what they themselves plant, they will gain from what they give, they will no longer turn over what they produce and keep only enough to still go hungry.

Unlike what we have been getting on CNN, this is the good news we need. The good news that God is listening right now, even this very moment, to every one of us that has not been heard. God is listening to the teachers in Ukraine and in Russia *and* in Syria and Afghanistan; God is listening to the teachers right here in Franklin County. God is listening this morning to each of us that has not been heard because of our race or our nationality or our sexuality or our age or our class. This is truly good news for us here in Franklin County even if it doesn’t sound like geopolitics. It is good news for the people of color who live and work and worship here; it is good news for the people regardless of their race who are going hungry or going cold. It is good news for the people of Franklin County who regardless of their race or class but because of their sexuality or gender are not heard in their workplaces or in their churches. It is good news for everyone whose voice is quivering with fear and anxiety; whose voice is quiet from grief or strained from exhaustion; whose voice sounds convinced it is alone and forgotten.

Even as the conditions in this world right now are harsh like the wilderness, God hears us and God is calling us. God chooses *our* voices to intercede between God’s will and the world’s to reveal a promised land for us all. Because it is not the high status people, it is not the pundits who talk about geopolitics, it is not even our own government or any other, that will bring the kin-dom of God down onto this earth. No one who is not listening to the voices of the poor and hungry and oppressed can do God’s will. It is us, like Moses in our midst, who will unite our many voices, and creatively combine them to make a powerful new sound. What God hears already is the sound that we will yet make together.

The good news is that the future does not belong to any one country. It belongs to the glory of God, and to our shining face, and that is only a religious way to say that it belongs to *us*.

Alleluia and amen.