



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon February 28, 2021 “History Is Present” Rev. David Jones

There have not been too many times in my life where I have really broken down, where I have really wept. But one time this did happen was early in the summer almost two years ago. I was in our little yellow car on a busy street on the west side of Jacksonville, stopped at a red light about three miles from my union hall, just off I-10. I needed to file a grievance at the hall on behalf of a friend of mine, a co-worker who had recently been fired. The co-worker was a young black man who had had a very mild physical altercation with his even younger white supervisor. What had happened was not what was troubling me as I sat still at the stoplight, but rather what I knew would not happen after I filed the grievance. It was certainly true that the white supervisor had been harassing my co-worker; it was true, according to several eyewitnesses, that the supervisor had called my co-worker the N word, and had used other offensive language throughout a particularly long and hard shift at the warehouse. It was also true that my co-worker had put his hands on the supervisor’s shoulders and lightly shoved him as a warning against insulting him any further. And it was true that the incident had been caught on tape. The facts were pretty well established, and I remember that even as I was delivering the grievance and holding out something like hope, I knew my friend’s job was probably lost for good.

But what was really upsetting me, what had me losing control of myself and weeping, was all the other facts, all the other truths, that were involved in this situation that would not be acknowledged or even considered, and not only by the company but by my union too. The supervisor--who in my view was equally guilty of violence, having harassed my co-worker and forced him to work unsafely repeatedly, and who showed none of the restraint that my friend did--he would get to keep his job, maybe after some sensitivity or anti-bias training.

My co-worker, on the other hand, was born into poverty, at the edge of the city, where the schools, often named after Confederate generals, were nearly collapsing. There weren't enough textbooks or workbooks, and the teachers were underpaid and overworked. My coworker was also acting as the primary care provider to his younger brother, while trying to get to a job across the city with no car and inadequate public transit--all this to say, my young friend had never learned to read and write. He was a hard worker, popular among his co-workers. He was particularly kind to new hires like me, when I first met him. But with everything he was dealing with, with all that he had already survived, he was not willing to be mistreated and degraded at work.

He became an active supporter of the group of us on our shift who were organizing our union, determined to see things changed. And I knew that he had been moved to that work area, to work under that supervisor, targeted for discipline, and for harassment, as a punishment for associating with us. And now, after becoming friends, he was coming to me to help him put his grievance into words. Despite his pride, he had talked to the union hall and explained that he needed someone to fill out his grievance for him; the union told him that was not allowed and they couldn’t accept it if it wasn’t filled out by his own hand. I wept in my car thinking of my friend, who after that phone call with the union,

was hiding from management in the parking lot, waiting to ask if I would help him. I wept because here was the weight of the world like a cross on one young man's shoulders, and no one was going to lift a finger to defend and uphold his God-given dignity.

Black History--like all history--does not really refer to the past. On the contrary, said James Baldwin, "the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us," from the fact that "history is literally present in all that we do."

I worked in a warehouse for three years before becoming a minister. It was simple but hard work, for very low pay. And because it was hard work for low pay, it often made more sense for people to make the rational choice to stay home if they didn't expect to get enough hours after coming in. Those who did get to work then faced pressures to work ever harder and, inevitably, more unsafely, to make up the gap in production. Then the warehouse gets louder and hotter as tempers flare.

I remember one day when we were badly understaffed, and we had a new supervisor, someone not just new to our area but new to the company. Well, I had dared enjoy my one 10 minute break by walking the length of the building to get to the one working vending machine, which left me no time to also use the bathroom. So when I got back to my work area, and made sure the conveyor belt was back on, that there wasn't going to be any delay in the operation, I called out to my supervisor to let her know I'd need to use the bathroom. That's when she announced loudly in front of my co-workers that I was supposed to have used the bathroom on my break, and that the answer was 'No.' She thought I had been asking permission, like a child in school. I explained that I wasn't asking permission. She yelled at me and threatened me with discipline. This is the environment lurking beneath our modern economy, an environment we don't read about in our newspapers very often, and rarely see covered on cable news; an environment we almost never see depicted in movies or on TV.

You cannot help in this environment to notice that these tough jobs are disproportionately being done by black Americans. If you look up the job-ladder a little ways to the delivery drivers, who make a good wage, the percentage of people of color begins to go down. And if you look all the way up to the very well paid long-haul drivers, the percentage goes down further. (The same thing was true for women: the warehouse was evenly split between men and women, but the driving ranks were certainly not).

So, when we talk about Black History, we are talking about this too. The warehouse, like all our workplaces, like our classrooms and our hospitals, carry American history within them. And that history, as I saw it up close, was clearly working *against* my black co-workers in the present day. In prejudice and discrimination, yes; but also structurally, in how so many of our cities are still effectively segregated, in how public services and infrastructure and public schools--crucial supports for working people--are constantly neglected and undermined. The result is that a person like my friend and co-worker, simply for being born into the poverty of his city--and for daring to hope there could be change--must be disciplined and punished.

Our reading today from the gospel according to Mark centers on an intimate and sharp exchange between Jesus and Peter. Jesus is foretelling his fate, explaining that the nature of his power being rendered in this world will involve his profound suffering. Peter doesn't want to hear it; he wants Jesus to be triumphant, adorned in robes and filled with power, like the kings of old. No one should suffer -- Peter is trying to correct Jesus. I think many of us can see ourselves in Peter and the disciples; we each in our own ways know something about suffering too. And so, like Peter, we can't bear to hear this message from Jesus.

But that is when Jesus turns in a flash of anger, and rebukes Peter right back. And he brings the same rebuke to all who would follow him: the way of Jesus is the way toward something new, it is the way toward a new life, and the way goes through the cross. The way has a destination, and it is actually a place on earth we have to get to, and because of human *history*, it will not be easy. There is no shortcut to justice and peace and a radical new kind of kin-dom.

Baldwin says history is literally present. And history felt present every morning, as some of us would gather outside the front entrance to gird ourselves up for the miserable day ahead. This warehouse was *not* the way it was because of *nature*; it was the way it was because of *history*. And for the first time in my life I found myself realizing that my place in this world is not with those who profit from this enduring history; it is with those in this world who do not profit. And that felt like deliverance. I do not have to spend my life in denial of history or even in guilt of history; instead, in a warehouse--in a country--of inequality and oppression, I can spend my life fighting to *change* history; to defeat it. Suddenly, despite the weight of this, I felt like a person set free.

There is no getting around that this passage from Mark today is difficult to accept. But rather than protest against it, rather than skip steps along the way, it is possible to lead lives that face history as we find it now. It is possible to face that suffering is all around us in our cities, in our schools, in our warehouses. If we wished all that away, we would not be changing history or defeating it, we would be ignoring it. To be unwilling to face it, to be unwilling to travel with it, to be unwilling to go through it, means leaving those who *are* living it, on their own. Jesus tells Peter there is another way, a way that stops thinking as one who profits from the past and starts thinking more as one who does not profit from it. Would we not then gain power to change this earth? Wouldn't we then be following Jesus not only to the cross but beyond it?

I can't put this all together theologically, or doctrinally. All I know is that my friend and co-worker is already Christlike in this world, is already bearing the cross of our country today. It will have been a great mistake for me--for all of us--to have become ministers, if it does not lead us to join him under it and bear the cross with him.

Amen.