



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

Sermon “Love is Right” Rev. David Jones

This past Thursday I gathered with about a dozen members of our church to discuss the film *Dawnland* - after we had been invited to do so by the Interfaith Council of Franklin County. The film was a documentary about both the history and the relationship today between white and indigenous peoples in this country. It took us inside Maine’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is the first such commission in this country. And on Thursday we began to wonder, what is the role of a church like ours in a truth and reconciliation process? We were getting ahead of ourselves, but it is clear that this is a major commitment of the Interfaith Council and that it is a deep spiritual concern of our own Mission and Social Justice Committee. I am moved by their commitment, and certainly welcome our church thinking about what words like truth and reconciliation really mean. I hope we will welcome the opportunity to learn more about the hopes and needs of indigenous people now, and how we might be able to, in time, to stand in solidarity with those hopes and needs.

I had this film and our discussion in mind this week when I turned to our scriptures. I enjoyed each of these passages on their own merits. The Isaiah passage in particular, which might remind us of Job’s dialogue with God, is so beautifully written. And there is probably not a more appropriate moment to hear God’s message of healing in Mark’s Gospel than right now. But I really felt something special happening once I read these scriptures side by side and heard them together.

In the passage from Isaiah, God confronts the people of Israel with a series of challenging questions. God has heard the people express a lack of faith, has heard them venting their frustrations; has known and felt their loss of hope, and borne witness to their despair. Though God’s questions are confrontational and might even have the ring of condescension--making a point of reminding the people that they are not gods themselves, and that even princes are nothing compared to the glory of God--by the end of this passage it is clear that God is speaking to them from a place of deep love and commitment. We have to remember that God is addressing a traumatized people. The Israelites were at that moment a people recently conquered and exiled. We must remember that in Isaiah, God is addressing a small nation that has been trampled on by a parade of mightier ones. God is reminding this small nation that the mightier ones that once ruled over them are not as great as they claim they are. The strong and the powerful--no matter how the Pharaohs or the princes or the imperial courts of this world in ancient times or in the present one may depict themselves--they are, ultimately, as nothing compared to God. None of these rulers and empires will last.

To a small nation, a nation that has been oppressed and not allowed its worship, that has been denied the right to self-determination, this is a pastoral and a liberating message. It is good news God delivers to the people, that, in the end, the only durable strength, the only *real* road to justice and freedom, is the tenderness and love of God, and the tenderness and love we may yet have for each other. So do not be weary, do not faint, as even the young and mighty do; instead remember who and how God loves you, and be patient that God’s way is being made *in* that love and by that love. It is not

God who has hidden our way or disregarded our human rights; that has been the terrible work of the false sovereigns, the petty rulers of the earth, who like any of us are small beneath the true sovereign we call God. So wait on the Lord, because the Lord never stops waiting on us.

But what can this mean for how we live our lives? We ourselves, as individuals, are not the rulers of the earth anymore than we are God. So what do we *do* with this faith and hope that 'might is not right', that love (perhaps tough love) is the only path worthy of God?

Where Isaiah gives us the words of a God towering over us, humbling us while deeply caring for us in our humbling, our reading from the Gospel according to Mark gives us the deeds and the prayers of a God walking among us -- not reminding us that we are small but showing us that we are giant. Here God doesn't humble us, God ennobles us. The people of God are no less than the children of God, so dear to God that God will have to come and find us where we are. And like any loving parent, who loves all their children equally, who doesn't play favorites, who is fair to each of them, Christ prioritizes or draws nearest to God's children that most need God. Maybe the child or children have lost their way; maybe they have been mistreated like Israel was by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Or maybe the child has grown old, has children of her own, and is terribly sick with a fever.

Fevers are awful things, you can never get comfortable or rest with a fever; it haunts and torments you, distorts time. This dis-ease in a feverish child makes a parent feel helpless. A parent so badly wants to make the fever go away, to make the illness go away. Simon must feel the same helplessness about his mother-in-law. I think this is something very moving and very sacred, how we commune across generations and commune with God in our compassion for the same person, like Simon and Christ when they care for Simon's mother-in-law. They stand in perfect solidarity with one another.

Isaiah reminds us that we are not the true God, that we are as small as grasshoppers and as rootless as stubble carried off by the winds. That message is subversive and pastoral when you are resisting the powerful, as the Israelites were. But here, in the presence of a feverish woman, in the presence of Christ who is like her parent and Simon who is her son, Mark is reminding us that when we feel compassion for another soul in our midst, we are actually very much *like* God. Instead of small specks on a blue planet beneath an eternal sovereign, we are divine children doing the very same heart-work of the Lord. And this work is so important and so dear to God, so urgent in God's cosmic life, that God comes to stand with us in seeing it done.

It is true that this story in Mark today is a story of miracles. Jesus miraculously lifts the fever from this woman. I know we can't do that, that no human can. But when I think of my mother or father or partner or friend helping me when I have been sick or injured, going out of their way, putting a cold cloth over my forehead--seeing *me* and not just a fever, seeing the importance of offering and providing comfort when it is urgently needed--those are sacred moments in anyone's life. If you have ever been sick and cared for, your heart knows how divine, how angelic, that caregiver has become; how similar that person is in that moment to the steadfast love that God takes great delight and pleasure in.

It seems to me that words like truth and reconciliation--and words like love and strength--would have meant something very different to the Israelites than the Assyrians or Babylonians. It is evident that sometimes God needs to humble us, and sometimes God needs to take our hand and lift it up. God is always working to bring about healing, always working to set us on the loving way. But we don't always know across the scriptures, across history, across communities, what that will look and sound like. Even Jesus withdraws from his work for a time, becoming human again, now the child rather than the parent, feeling a little overwhelmed, a little helpless, and needing to recover his strength through prayer in a deserted place.

Our church answered a very serious and considered invitation of the Interfaith Council of Franklin County to take first, searching steps. These steps were a chance to begin reflecting on and learning about the meaning of truth and reconciliation between white and indigenous peoples. It will be a very long and difficult--and a heartbreaking and heartmending--process. A process worthy of God. But whatever shape that process takes, I want us to follow our Mission and Social Justice committee in

opening ourselves up to it. We are going to need the strength of faith and the courage of the truth at every step. And we are going to have to look at how this scripture that we cherish has been used in our history, and we are going to have to work hard to see what its rightful use is now.

It seems to me that these scriptures this morning are a timely start. Taken together, God speaks to remind us that might is *not* right, that the powerful are nothing compared to God. God speaks to us to remind us that God is so concerned about what we do here on this earth to each other and with each other--and to and with this Earth--that goes out of God's way to be present to it. God speaks to us, that we not become arrogant; and God speaks to us, that we not lose our divine spark and our hope in the sovereignty of steadfast love. And the unity in these messages is that we should keep faith in our own heart. It may take work and a tremendous amount of discernment, but I know that each heart remembers and knows how to do this work. And I know that it is the kind of work we are supposed to do.

Because in this work of the heart, in our love and compassion for one another, we overcome our weariness, and we overcome our helplessness, and we become less like the rulers of this earth, who think might is right, and we become more like God's children, who *know* that love is right.

Alleluia and amen.