



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

Sermon March 21, 2021 “The Rulers of This World Will Be Driven Out” Rev. David Jones

You know I’m a fan of basketball, and this weekend marks the beginning of the March Madness tournament, which is really one of the great sporting events of the year. I think it’s so entertaining because it’s so unpredictable, there are always big upsets and wild finishes to close games. If you’ve been watching college basketball these past few years, you may have noticed the increase in Asian American and Asian players participating in the tournament. I think in general our sports are becoming more diverse, more representative of our population.

A few weeks ago, an Asian American NBA player named Jeremy Lin was giving an interview when a journalist asked how Covid was impacting his season. Lin has had a number of really great seasons in the NBA -- and won an NBA title with my favorite team just a couple years ago. Currently, he is playing in a developmental league for NBA teams called the G-League. I think the journalist was wondering if maybe Covid--with all the precautions that need to be observed, the isolation--was wearing on Lin, and that was maybe why he was struggling to play his best basketball right now, why he’s in the G- League instead of the NBA.

Lin answered the question, and did talk some about how Covid has been impacting his experience, but not in the way the interviewer expected. Jeremy Lin explained that racist comments from opposing players and crowds -- something he has always experienced in his career-- have dramatically increased during the pandemic. Lin decided to use this interview to raise his voice a little, to let the NBA and the G-League and the entire basketball world know that anti-Asian racism is rampant in the US today.

Jeremy Lin is a successful and very well compensated professional basketball player. That has not protected him from experiencing racism. But he didn’t just speak out for himself and his fellow players. Lin has been speaking out because he has been increasingly fearful that this racism was heading toward something violent. That beyond cruel and hurtful words and attitudes, we may be headed for something that might take someone’s life. And now, this great basketball tournament begins in the shadow of Atlanta.

I looked a little more into Jeremy Lin and his story yesterday, and two things really stood out to me: the first I’ve mentioned already, that after 9 years in professional basketball, and college and high school basketball before that, his experience with racism has been worse this year than ever. This *should* surprise us--after all, haven’t we progressed? But in recent years both political parties in Washington have reached a consensus about who the biggest threat to US power is; they’ve agreed on China. Remembering that there was a concerted effort to blame China as Covid caught our own country off guard and unprepared, suddenly we have context for a Gallup poll released last month recording that 45 percent of Americans now view China as the greatest threat to the United States, doubling in the span of one year (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/337457/new-high-perceptions-china-greatest-enemy.aspx>).

The other thing that stood out to me about Lin was the story of his time playing for Harvard. Harvard did not qualify for March Madness while Lin played there, but they did have successful seasons with Lin leading them on the court. Their success meant Lin was a player opposing teams and fans were aware of. And during that time playing for Harvard, Lin's worst experiences with racism--according to him--often came from other Ivy League schools. I think these two things suggest that anti-Asian racism does not just materialize out of thin air, it doesn't just stumble into our hearts and minds. Even our finest educational institutions are not succeeding in undoing racism and may sometimes be re-enforcing it. Racism has something to do--in part at least--with the will of those who are powerful. This is the trouble I have sometimes when something like the shooting this week in Atlanta happens. I recognize how important it is to be able to describe what happened accurately, to be able to name this a hate crime, or an act of terror; I recognize the value, in the wake of this, of grappling with things like white supremacy and misogyny. And I see the hypocrisy in our reluctance as a society to describe crimes perpetrated by white people in the same terms we are so quick to ascribe to crimes perpetrated by people of color.

And, I also worry that if we locate the violence of this crime solely in the space of ideas, in the realm of individual morality--if we diagnose it like a virus--we risk failing to confront exactly what sort of power is behind the preservation of the racism that haunts us. I have often referred to racism as another kind of pandemic, I have at times found that useful. But racism isn't actually a pandemic. Sometimes our metaphors can get in our way. Because no one--despite some of the rhetoric we hear--devised or created or taught the coronavirus. No human has an interest or a stake in preserving a life threatening and economically ruinous virus. But racism is almost the opposite of the coronavirus: it is devised or created, it is taught, it is something willfully introduced and re-introduced into human life, over and over again, regardless of the lives it costs us. It has even been the law of this land--and someone benefits from that.

After George Floyd was murdered, I remember seeing a really powerful clip of Kwame Ture, formally known as Stokely Carmichael (who coined the slogan "Black power" during the Civil Rights Movement), speaking to an audience about power. And he put it this way: "If a white man wants to lynch me, that's his problem. If he's got the power to lynch me, *that's* my problem. Racism is not a question of attitude; racism is a question of power."

It is important to be accurate in describing what happened in Atlanta; it is important to be courageous in naming it. The attack in Atlanta was a violent racist act against Asian and Asian American women. But what feels very long overdue is an analysis of the powers behind such an act. We need an analysis of the power that sponsors and perpetuates racism, or what has just happened will happen again. A coalition of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders has reported over 3800 incidents of hate directed against the Asian community during this pandemic alone. It won't be enough to change hearts and minds and attitudes; we will have to change the power behind them.

This is all very heavy at a time when we are all carrying too much weight. But you know, something else I learned about Jeremy Lin yesterday is that he is a devout Christian. His faith has been a source of strength for him throughout his basketball career. Racism has been an effective tool of the powerful throughout history because it makes others powerless. But Lin isn't powerless, partly because he has faith that another world is possible, that another reality is possible, that the powers behind racism can be toppled. I imagine Jeremy Lin is reading these same scriptures alongside us today. And these are very *powerful* scriptures today. God speaks to us through Jeremiah, saying that though we have failed to uphold the covenant up to this point, a new covenant will be made. And in a world where the powers behind things like racism have succeeded in dividing us, in ordering us into least and greatest, into less and more important, into young and old, white and black--in such a world, God will cut through that ruling power to reach out to each of us, will reach straight into the body of God's people, and will write God's will directly onto our hearts.

It is important here that we understand the ancient Hebrew meaning of the word "heart" is different from our English word today. Today the word heart often means sentiment, or attitude, or

feeling; but for the ancient Israelites, “heart” meant the whole body. In ancient Hebrew, the heart is like the power-center of everything. It was the ancients’ sentiments and feelings and their thoughts that had misled them in their failure to abide by their covenant with God; so now God wants a new covenant with the body itself. Our bodies--and our society--will become the places of God in the world. Our lives will no longer be contested, we will no longer need to educate or persuade each other, we will no longer make appeals to feelings or ideas; our lives--our very bodies--will contain God’s will. And so all that lies behind us when that day comes can be forgiven and forgotten. Because the power of our lives will have been changed forever.

Like Jeremy Lin, I read our scriptures as a Christian. And I understand Jesus to be a new kind of human that fulfills a new covenant with God. For me, the law of the Lord *is* set inside Jesus; he doesn’t need the formal education or the credentials of the worldly powers to know God. God’s will is written on his heart, in his whole body and being. Jesus does not want to die; his soul in this Lenten season is deeply troubled about what will happen to him. And it is not God’s will *that* he die. What Jesus does want to do--what God’s will on Jesus’ heart compels him to do--is to love. Love utterly, love with consuming zeal, love flagrantly and immoderately, regardless of race, or nationality, or sexuality, or gender identity, or ability. Love at all times, in all love’s ways, in all its forms. And this love that draws people to him, it is in his blood, it is on his skin and in the fabric of his clothes, it is in Jesus’s *body*. This love--this other power, this power of God--cannot co-exist with the divisive powers of this world. These powers are mutually exclusive. And on Palm Sunday they will meet in Jerusalem.

In our world today, there is a lot of power behind racism. But it is not the power we put our faith in. It is not the power that any person of goodwill can abide. Our power, the true power, is God’s love, and love alone. It will not be enough to have the right attitude or the right sentiment. We will have to find a way to live our whole lives according to the power of God. We will have to drive out those who benefit from racism. And surely the days are coming when we will.

Amen.