



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

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**Rev. David Jones, Minister**

**Sunday, April 10, 2022**

**Sermon “On the Cusp”**

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**Sermon**

“On The Cusp”

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*‘My house shall be a house of prayer’.* You know, you wouldn’t think such simple words, summing up such a simple mission, could manage to upset so many powerful people. Maybe it is because of the way Jesus describes what the house is now, how he names what must be changed: while it will become a house of prayer one day, right now the powerful have made Jesus’ house into a den of thieves. The powerful people do not see it the same as Jesus does, of course. But, he must have struck a chord. The truth has a way of catching on.

As I was thinking about this, it reminded me of a young man who spoke some truth aloud a couple of years ago at the outset of the pandemic. The young man had grown up in New Jersey. As a kid he was bullied because his family couldn’t afford the expensive sneakers trendy at school. Like so many kids, including in the small town I grew up in, and I’m sure here in the hilltowns too, he was bullied because his family was poor. But he made friends, he was an athlete, he got through high school, and then he went to work.

He worked a number of different jobs, struggling with some of them, excelling at others. Finally, he took a job at Amazon. Amazon is now the second largest private sector employer in the US, and employs over 1.5 million people worldwide. In recent years, much has come to light about what it is like to work at Amazon. Notably, the rate of workplace injuries has been found to be 80% higher in Amazon warehouses than in the warehouses of its competitors. The pandemic has only added to these workplace issues, because so many of us came to rely on companies like Amazon to purchase goods from the safety of our homes rather than take the risks of shopping in person. Whether we always were thinking of it or not, we shifted that risk onto others. Already unsafe jobs became even less safe.

One day at the warehouse, this young man learned that one of his co-workers was really sick. He had tried to call out of work, because his symptoms were consistent with Covid, but he was told to report or miss a paycheck. The young man was outraged, and afraid. He decided if he was an essential worker, then his safety ought to be essential too. So he walked out. His closest friends, forming only a small group, followed him. And the walk-out at Amazon over safety conditions and Covid made national news.

The young man who had not gone to college became an easy target. In leaked emails, an army of consultants and managers, vastly outnumbering the few employees who had actually walked out, made a calculated decision to paint the young man as an irresponsible, immoral, and undereducated troublemaker. They got caught describing him in a memo as inarticulate and unintelligent. They fired him in the days that followed. But the warehouse workers took notice, and they struck a chord when they called the firing “retaliation.”

Two years later, this young man, who is named Christian by the way, just became the president of the Amazon Labor Union, after successfully organizing the major Staten Island warehouse that had slandered and fired him for daring to speak just a simple truth. And this breakthrough has been called the most significant victory in the US labor movement in a generation. Christian is 33 years old.

Over 100 Amazon warehouses across the country are now laying the groundwork for union campaigns of their own. This is a moment of triumphant entry. But it is only the beginning of Christian's mission.

The scripture reading set out for Palm Sunday often cuts off when Jesus, in a defiant mood, boasts to the Pharisees that even if he instructed his disciples to keep silent – even if he instructed them to be quiet and orderly, to not be disruptive or not to show the signs of their excitement, the sound of their hopes – the stones, the earth itself, would shout for joy. In other words, what is happening is unstoppable. God's whole Creation, as much as any one of us, will be witness to it. And to all that has troubled us in the season of Lent, to all that has seemed wrong to us in our time in the wilderness, this inevitable noise rushes to respond and to set right. Though we have been lost or felt helpless, though we have suffered and been fearful especially that we might be living alone, this sensational moment in the Gospel reveals that the people and the earth are united and cannot be defeated. This is good news for all people of faith and goodwill, and it is troubling news for the powers that be. In the coming Holy Week, we will see how the powers that be, growing desperate, will try to stop what cannot be stopped.

But today, on this Palm Sunday, we have not cut off our reading at the jubilant moment of entry. We continue, and we follow Jesus into the temple. We do this to see that the triumph of unity, the outbreak of joy at the gates, the irrepressible hope even of God's stones, is not an idle thing. It is happening for a reason. Jesus and this revelation in hosannas is not a bright but brief consolation on the road to Holy Week. It is not a precursor. Rather, this arrival in Jerusalem, this sensational moment, is more like the main event; it is the height of the promise in Jesus' own lifetime of what his ministry can yet accomplish.

Jesus is done being coy about what he's been up to. Caesar claims power over Palestine and the Jewish nation. But the true king has now arrived, not a king at all but a suffering servant, whose power is in his vulnerability instead of his might, whose goal is justice not conquest, whose instrument is parables of love and solidarity and reconciliation not violence and prejudice and separation.

Jesus has arrived to take the next steps in his mission with the people. He has gathered the people, he has attended to their illnesses and fears, he has broken bread and opened new paths for each of them to find one another through acts like the forgiveness of debts and the creation of kinship that breaks down barriers of race and nationality and gender. He has shown how every person belongs to God, was created in God's image, and so every person belongs at the table of abundance; already he has shown that every belly and every dream deserves to be fed by daily bread and kindness.

But this mission has only been accomplished in part. More work is to be done. And the people celebrate Jesus' arrival both for what has been accomplished in the countryside, and for what it will soon accomplish in the city; the people and the stones shout and sing because of what has been happening already, *and* for what will happen next. The temple has not been restored to God yet, the land has not been restored to God yet, but they will be. In Jerusalem, at the temple, on Palm Sunday, we are on the cusp of justice. The mission is only just beginning.

Holy Week is next, but it is not the ministry of Jesus. The Last Supper, the cross and the resurrection – these are the things we do to fight back and return to the ministry of Jesus, so that we can receive our commissioning today. These are the survival rituals of a community finding a way to carry on in the face of suffering and even death. Because, immediately as Jesus enters Jerusalem and the people feel free and come to life, the false powers of this world prepare themselves to resort to violence. Holy Week is our spiritual reckoning with how the powerful respond to a simple ministry of unity determined to achieve justice for all.

In Holy Week, we hold space to eat with Christ and his disciples, to serve one another on Maundy Thursday with a subversive intimacy; we gaze again on Friday at Jesus' passion and sit in the valley and shadow of the cross and cry out in forsakenness; and then finally we pick ourselves up in grief and press on to Easter Sunday. We roll away that boulder to find not a hollow message but an empty tomb, that restores our hope.

And likewise, we will continue in choir and in the pews to sing happily; sacred music anticipates the harmony of the society still to come, it heralds its coming. And we will continue to write and recite our prayers of joy and concern so that our mortal pains and griefs can be received into the immortal Spirit. We will continue, in other words, to set ourselves apart as Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Bahai, as people of conscience and goodwill—all of us pledged not to a set of rules or even specific beliefs, but to the simple ministry of peace and justice for all.

Set apart in this way, as consecrated people, when we die, we live. We live on in memories, in our children, in our communities; in our principles, in the by-laws and structures of our church. And we live on especially in all that grows in the places we tended and where we once lived. We live on in all that we did, which changes history by ripple or by current; whether or not our name is remembered or the sound of our laughter, our life *is* echoed in every other life, the same way a wind bears our shape when it passes around us. The sanctuary, our worship, the church – these sustain, demonstrate, preserve the mission that causes the people and even the stones to stir and shout. We are set apart according to God's purpose, like those who shouted their joy at Christ's arrival in the city. Our willingness to be set apart—our receptiveness to the resistance of joy in the face of an unjust world—will mean that even crucifixion cannot take our brother and teacher from us.

Here, we make a sacred space. We discover and reveal sacred hearts, we realize that we live among souls, until all of Creation becomes a house of prayer, until all things learn to revere each other. When the ministry that Holy Week renews is one day fulfilled, then we will not need these walls of our church, we will not need a re-dedicated pipe organ or worship of any kind; we will not need choirs and deacons and ministers of sacrament or music. We will not need anything because God's will will be done on earth as in heaven. And whether we live long lives or short ones, in good health or ill, our spirits will not know trouble. Our spirits will never doubt that we are loved, we will not be made to wonder about our merit, or be deceived into thinking we mean less or more to God than anything else.

And if we live according to such a will, if we are actually the children of God and in God's protection, we will not ever have to fear death. Because if we have only ever known true love – if our daily experience is one of profound mutual recognition, and nourishment of body and spirit alike – how could death mean anything but a new dimension of God's endless love? After all, does God love the trees less in winter than in their summer bloom? Does God love the soil less when it is brown than when it is green, or the sky when it is gray instead of blue? When our mission is complete, life's experiences will still be varied and challenging, but they will never be experienced alone and we will never be in doubt of God's presence.

This is what awaits us at the end of our mission. Not the cross. Not the resurrection. Those are there to keep us going. They teach us what obstacles our mission faces. Those are our license to re-ignite our hope. Those are the things that place us back at the gates of Jerusalem.

May this Holy Week strengthen and renew you, who are the children of God. May we shout together with the stones, knowing we live on the cusp of justice.

Alleluia and amen.