



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

Sermon April 18, 2021 “Keeping It Simple” Rev. David Jones

For someone who spent so much time in school, I was never a very good student. I remember taking a music history class in college, and really struggling with it. The class was straightforward: our professor would assign a list of classical music pieces that we were to listen to and analyze. Then for our exams, a selection of those pieces would be played, and we would have to recognize and identify them by ear, and answer some technical questions about each one. I learned something from that challenging experience that has stayed with me. When the professor assigned 100 pieces, it was totally overwhelming. I just couldn't imagine getting through them all. Even though I knew I needed to just put the time in, just study a ton, I felt so discouraged that I would actually study very little. This was not a recipe for success. And maybe I wasn't alone in this, because later in the year, in the midterm and final exam of the second semester, the professor assigned a much smaller number of pieces. Right away I felt like I could see that memorizing this smaller number was actually possible. Feeling encouraged, I studied a ton--I studied the smaller list way more than I had studied the longer one. And it showed on the exams.

I think when we are overwhelmed and feel discouraged, it is very difficult to move forward, whereas when we can break the work up a little and feel like we can handle the task--when we can feel encouraged--we can make great strides in what really matters. I don't have any of those music pieces memorized, not from the short list anymore than the long one. But the class taught me to appreciate music in a new and deeper way, and I cherish music to this day.

I had a similar experience as a student chaplain last year at Baystate Medical Center. I remember when I first started visiting patients, how often I felt totally overwhelmed, how often I got caught up with so many academic questions, how even though someone was right in front of me, sharing their life with me openly and plainly, my mind would wander, I would become lost in abstractions and expectations. I was distracted from the moment by a need to have some mastery over my theology or over scripture. And I wasn't much help to the person in front of me as a result, because I wasn't really there *with them*, I was elsewhere, I was distant because I was so caught up in myself, or in an idea of what I should be. Thankfully, over time, with practice, and with a supportive peer group and a wise teacher, I began to understand that the answer to the questions that were arising for a patient or for a grieving loved one (and for me) were right there in the room with us, not up in the clouds or off, hidden away in some book. As I became present to the person in front of me, I could be of service simply by listening for whatever their need may be. I could even begin to understand what love or God means to us in a given moment: it means providing for food, if the person in front of you is hungry; it means providing for rest, if the person in front of you is tired; it means providing comfort, if the person in front of you is in pain. God's presence means freeing someone when they are trapped, loving someone who doubts that they are loved, forgiving someone if they cannot yet forgive themselves, inviting and being curious and listening to someone's story when they have no one else to tell it to and don't realize how precious and how meaningful their life is. The God who is love is actually that simple, and if we have the courage to be present to each other--including to grief and heartbreak and violence--we will be surprised to discover that a new life has been promised, and is already beginning to take shape in this simple service to one another.

In Lent and Easter I am often overwhelmed by the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of this person named Jesus. It is easy to get bogged down in all the big questions, to be awe-struck by the mystery of it all, to even be bothered by some of what is being claimed. And the temptation to dwell in one place and not all places--to sit only in the shadow of the cross, or to skip over that shadow and leap straight into the daybreak of Easter, or in either case to neglect all that came before both of these moments, that brought these moments on--is a very strong temptation. Just as an example or teacher of faith, just as a person who lived as if the song list of faith is never too long to memorize, who never shrinks from all faith's challenges, Jesus can be an entirely overwhelming subject.

But like in my music history class, we are not alone in feeling overwhelmed. In our reading from the Gospel according to Luke this morning--after Jesus has visited a couple of disciples on the road to Emmaus--Jesus now visits with all of the disciples gathered together. In Luke, this is the first appearance witnessed by so many. And though Jesus addresses them with a word of peace, the disciples are afraid. Like Thomas in the Gospel of John, the disciples are uncertain of what they are seeing. At least some of them think his presence is unreal, that Jesus is a ghost or a spirit. Jesus gently reassures them that he is real, that his *presence* is real, it can be touched as well as seen, that he is flesh and bone like they are. The disciples, even in joy, are "disbelieving and still wondering." What does this apparent resurrection--if it is that--what does it mean?

When I read about these disciples here, I can almost see them all worked up, I can hear them speaking breathlessly, frantically, I can see their limbs flailing, their fingers scratching at their temples or chins, trying to solve this mystery, this riddle suddenly confronting them. They are like theologians or artists or scientists (or student chaplains) trying to prove or master all meaning, all forms, all of faith. But for all that they are wondering, Jesus, ever the teacher, gently reminds them what they are neglecting.

Cutting right to the chase, right to what really matters about his presence among them--about what his whole life and ministry has meant, what God means to us in this very moment--he asks these disciples very simply, "Have you got anything to eat?" Jesus is hungry, and like the presence of anyone right in front of us who is hungry, what he means to us in this moment is that he must be fed. It's not that there isn't more to discuss and explore together, it's not that there won't be more to do next, but clearly nothing else will have any meaning if this simple, achievable thing is not done first. And in fact, in this passage, after Jesus has asked for food and the disciples have provided it--after the one who is hungry before us has been seen in their hunger and has been fed--suddenly what was mysterious, what was academic or abstract, becomes plain. After Jesus has eaten in their presence, *then* the disciples' minds are opened to understanding.

In this striking passage in Luke, we have Jesus alive and among us--risen to see and to touch--and our foolish disciples have neglected to feed him. And we have Jesus, like always, graciously reminding his disciples and reminding us that God's love for us, that Jesus' whole ministry, that faith and hope now as always consist simply in feeding the person that is hungry. All of our questions begin to be answered just this simply.

Simple never means easy of course. Feeding the one before you who is hungry can be hard, it may lead us into being persecuted or criticized, people may become upset and will wonder what we are getting up to, if we do the simple faithful thing that the Lord's presence demands. I know at the hospital I learned that the needs of the patient or the family are often beyond a chaplain, nurse, or doctor, that actually their hunger was a hunger for better health insurance or a more stable job, for paid sick leave, for childcare while they or a loved one recover. I think we all can appreciate that the simple, faithful thing can quickly become provocative and dangerous.

But today I want to keep things very simple. Because those hazard signs along the road that *is* still ahead, those reasons to be cautious about fulfilling all that God's presence among us asks of us, those can be navigated and overcome. Nothing will get in our way--nothing will stop our minds from being opened to understanding--if we break up the work a little bit, and first concentrate on getting the living Christ, and anyone before us who is hungry, their share of our broiled fish or bread. The person with the empty

stomach, whoever they are--whether they have lived according to the law or if they have been lawless, whether they are mean or kind, whether they deserve or don't deserve, however that criteria has been set down—that's the person Jesus instructs us to prioritize. And this is good news; at this we should feel encouraged. Because we can do this. In this rich country, as rich in talent and creativity as in wealth, we *can* make sure that everyone has enough food for themselves and their families. And pretty soon, from this simple, achievable task, we will find that we are able to do other things too, and that in these many simple things we are doing, that we are beginning to live the surprising new life that God has long promised.

Without even going searching for resurrection, these simple acts of faith will mean we can not help but stumble upon it.

Alleluia and amen.