



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

429 Main Street ❖ P.O. Box 519 ❖ Ashfield MA 01330 ❖ 413.628.4470
<http://www.ashfielducc.org> ❖ uccashfield@gmail.com ❖ [facebook.com/ashfielducc](https://www.facebook.com/ashfielducc)
Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, May 19, 2022

“God of Pride, or the Gospel According to Ashfield” Rev. David Jones

Last Sunday, Satch asked us ‘why,’ why *our* church on that particular Sunday, and of course this is a unique question each time it’s posed, with a unique answer. And we saw and heard that last week, how every one who spoke had their own story or journey to relate, and also their own hopes, their own fears. There were some common threads too. It didn’t seem to matter if one was Born Again or was not Christian at all, whether one was raised in a church or raised the farthest from one; it didn’t seem to matter whether the speaker was a man or a woman, gay or straight. What mattered, and what seemed to be the most durable part of our collective answer, was an understanding that the community comes first—and that the community only succeeds when it respects and cares for each individual. What mattered about our differences is that they matter equally.

A common way of expressing this was to cite the leadership of Rev. Kate, how open she was, how eager she was to affirm each person standing in front of her, and to invite each of us to belong here (and I include myself in this, because I experienced it for myself when I got here. I sat in Sherrill’s living room with Rev. Kate and Holly after being officially called to serve this church, and I remember how quickly she made me feel not just tall but full of spirit. I remember how immediately I felt recognized by her). And this is a common thread each of us continues to offer today, it was the one Satch pulled at last week, what each of you did for each other by speaking the way you did. Whatever your faith, there is a place for you here. If this church community can be described as religious, it is a religion of inclusion, the gospel according to the folks of Ashfield. This is the church one chooses when your own greatest need is for others to be safe and cared for; this is the church one chooses out of love of the men who gather for coffee at Neighbors, or gather at the Open and Affirming Hardware Store; the one you choose out of love for a partner who feels differently than you about faith; the one you choose when you have a cause to fight for, or a ministry of theater to share.

The religion practiced here is the religion of sharing our gifts, of seizing life together, of building a community that is as loving and as generous as the heart of a well-recognized child. And we are all children, even if we are at different stages of life. And so we all have a child’s vision within us, like an acorn that will become an oak, like a wind that is ready to carry us across any waters if we can position our body just so to catch it.

Caity and I were at the AT&T store on the Monday after Satch had asked us this question. We were there to make a change to our phone plan, and so a young person working there asked us what we do for a living. Caity told them she was a teacher—great news, we learned; there is a discount for teachers. Then they turned to me: “Me? I’m a minister,” They were surprised: “that’s the last thing I thought you’d say.” I must have looked confused, because they quickly pointed to the rainbow ribbon I had pinned to my jacket. I had forgotten it was there. They explained they were from a religious family, and I guess not a religious family like ours at this church. “Well my church is different,” I explained. “I got this ribbon at Pride, which our church marched in.” The conversation did not continue—there are no discounts at AT&T for ministers. But I hope a new question got started, and maybe one day there will be another unique answer.

I’ve been thinking about Satch’s question all week. Why am I here today? Why do I serve this church in particular? Why did I join the United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ? The

fact that these churches are the kind of religious communities that march in Pride is as good a place as any to start. I was always curious about mythology and religion growing up, and I always had an eye for church buildings. But curiosity and an appreciation for beauty is not the same as entering a sanctuary, as finding a place in the pews let alone at a pulpit. Wondering about God or the divine is not the same as speaking to her. Being convinced that there is such a thing as justice is not the same as believing it will one day come.

Churches that march for Pride make a claim that God or the divine is a living force not a spent one. They claim God is an active Word, a verb in our midst as well as in our history. Since God is alive, and since God made us in God's own image, the deepest and most resilient part of us is alive with God, and even *is* a part of God. Our church chooses the life of God today—chooses who God is becoming, who God is becoming through us—over the idea of a static God, over the idea of God as a remote disciplinarian. The young person who helped me at AT&T only knew of a God and a church of the past, “a masquerade of dry bones in a faded wardrobe” (Emerson), that attempts to imprison the living God of today. The young person did not realize or understand that they themselves have the living God within, an unseen wind that their gender identity can uniquely catch and set sail with. The clothing of the living God that Paul describes in his letter to the Galatians is “no longer male and female.”

So I am here because of Pride, where a living God marches and sings and transforms, where a living God is creatively and vibrantly charting a new course in and with each of us. I can start there because when I was in high school I had long conversations with friends of mine who were Christians as I became intensely curious about religion, as I became a seeker of answers to that more general “why” question. At that time, the federal government in Canada—I think in 2005—was about to pass legislation to make marriage equality the law of the land. My Christian friends opposed this. I remember I had a Jewish friend who opposed it too, and many of my other friends who were not religious opposed this change as well. My friends thought that we had no business changing this traditional institution to suit the times we lived in. But I felt that that is exactly what we should do, that we always have to change with the times.

I'm into my 30s now (!) and I have started playing basketball with Tom and Alex at the Cowell Gymnasium. When I was younger, I could play without a worry in the world, I could run as fast as I wanted, jump for every rebound, and dive on the floor for every loose ball. But I haven't played basketball in a long time. Getting back into it is a process, right? I have to build muscles I've neglected, I have to take care to play within myself, so I don't get injured. I have to approach things differently because my body is different. Or, in the winter we dress in layers for warmth, in the summer we wear less to stay cool. Change is part of life, part of Creation, part of God's nature, and we change with it. If we don't, if we are too stubborn, if we live in denial, we won't hear what new thing God wants to do with us, and we'll end up injuring ourselves—or worse, injuring someone else. And that someone else could be our own sibling, or child or grandchild, or a dear friend. It could be a stranger. Ultimately, it will be a fellow person, someone who is our sibling whether we know them or not.

The living God is all around us, and must be sought out on the street, and in challenges to norms and institutions, in new horizons of identity—in the twinship of a boy and a grown woman brought together by painted fingernails (like in our prayer last week). The living God is revealed in the struggle for new and deeper freedoms for individuals and for nations. The living God takes the law and tradition seriously, but to deal with it, to shape it to become more just for God's people today. Likewise God is working on us, on our identity as people, as citizens. For too long the masculine identity has been dominated with unchecked violence. For too long the feminine identity has been oppressed. For too long non-binary identities have been denied. For too long sexuality has been distorted. The living God, who is alive in all of us, is not contained in one identity or two, and this is why the living church belongs at Pride. Pride is a vanguard place of human identity, and therefore a vanguard place for God's identity. God ministers to the church through Pride.

So I can answer Satch's question by citing this church's faithful place at Pride, and with that encounter in the AT&T store. But my journey took an important turn in Jacksonville. There I learned that

God is struggling to be free within and through us, with another motive. Not only does God want to be fully witnessed and be free to be who God is in manifold ways. God also needs each of us to get along so that God's love can be experienced fully by all people. This is what I came to understand in Jacksonville, working in a warehouse. Because so long as some identities are suppressed, as long as some people are made to feel like less—to be less in this world—as long as skin color or gender can be ranked and sorted, and can throw up walls between us, greedy men and selfish nations can deceive us. So long as there *is* Jew and Greek, there *is* slave and free, there *is* male and female—so long as there is white and black, settler and indigenous, rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed—then the poor will not eat. So long as there are these haunting iniquities and deep divisions between us, children of God, and therefore the living God, will be doomed to suffer. And another kind of unity-in-diversity will reign. Because in that warehouse in Jacksonville, it didn't matter what you believed in, what you looked like, or who you loved, we were *all* poor. What we had in common was not what we heard last week about our church community. What we had in common as rank-and-file workers was misery, exhaustion, humiliation; we had powerlessness and poverty and all its anxieties in common. We had anger and despair in common. This is the false unity God's people are made to experience under the reign of greed that presides today, instead of the true unity of dignity under the reign of God's love.

We often look back on the past and shake our heads in shock at the cruelty we find, but too often we do not see the present, we do not see how our goods are made and delivered, how workers are being mistreated, how the middle class has suddenly disappeared. We somehow step right past homelessness, and do not ask the 'whys' of food banks. We donate emergency housing and food, as Good Samaritans should, but we do not root out their cause, we do not try to end poverty and hunger as Jesus taught us to do. As long as we fail to celebrate and to cherish how we are each different—and fail as a result to pull at the common threads that bind us—we will continue to think too small, and we will forsake our potential to reach out and touch the glory of a living God who breathes through each of us

So why am I here? Because I believe that God always sees what we fail to—and more, God *feels*, God *suffers*, because God is alive even in those we continue to look past. God is especially alive there. And God will bring a change in society whether we are prepared to change with it or not. The Psalmist and Saint Paul pull at the same common thread in different times. Their answers are unique to the question of 'why,' but God's love is always at stake as it is today. God's will for equality is still seeded, still shut up like a fire in our bones. Love is still here calling us on, urging us to gather and to meet and to recognize *everyone* without exception. I am here because I believe this church is the place to assemble, where we can dare to ask: 'why' do we treat God and each other the way we do?

Why am I here? I am here because God calls me here, calls me to a sanctuary where the living God is present, where the living God is busy working on setting God's many identities free here in our midst, so that the common thread of equality both in dignity *and* in food—on earth as it is in heaven—will have a fighting chance to win. I am not here for charity, we can do charity anywhere. I am *here* because I want to be surrounded by people who not only acknowledge that there is such a thing as justice, but also, through faith, are certain it is coming. I am here to be surrounded by people who trust, regardless of religion, that we are all heirs to that promise. I am here because the God inside me, and the God inside each of you, will never turn their back on the God inside all who hunger now.

Alleluia and amen.