



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

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, May 21, 2022 Guest Sermon by Kate Pousant Scarborough

My name is Kate Pousant Scarborough. I grew up in Ashfield, attending Sunday School at this church for several years, and have lived in the area ever since. I'm the director of Shelburne Falls Yoga, where I've had the opportunity to work with many of you. Today, I'll be speaking as a Coordinating Committee member with the Massachusetts Poor People's Campaign, and I'm here to tell you about the Poor People's Campaign and about our upcoming Poor People's and Low Wage workers Assembly and Moral March on Washington on June 18.

Before I do, I'd like to share with you that my work with the PPC has been shaped by my own experiences with poverty in this community. When I became a single mom in 2008, my son and I struggled to get by for many years. We lived in 10 locations in 10 years in a nearly impossible search for safe and affordable housing, something that has become even more challenging today. I learned to skip meals to keep my son fed, and to burn scrap wood and old furniture to keep warm. And we both learned to keep silent about our experiences out of fear, knowing that the stigma surrounding poverty would make our lives even harder.

This is part of why the campaign resonated so strongly for me: I experienced firsthand the scorn and blame that are actually born of a deliberate narrative to keep the millions of people like myself ashamed & separated, and thus powerless. I felt the power and possibility of shifting that narrative, of boldly speaking truth about the policies that have created poverty and inequality by design. Today, the promise of working together for the benefit of all people toward truth, love, justice, and equal protection under the law keeps me inspired even in the most challenging times.

When Dr. King, along with the SCLC, began the original Poor People's Campaign in 1968, he understood the inextricable link between militarism, poverty, and systemic racism. He understood we must ALL work together in order to affect broad and lasting change, actively resisting ongoing efforts to divide and silence people experiencing different forms of oppression. He saw the depravity of billions of dollars being spent on war when people were starving and dying on the streets. This depravity has only been amplified with the passage of years, and with the passage of an endless river of legislation intended to uphold that status quo.

And let's be clear, divide and conquer has long been a deliberate strategy to keep oppressed people from building power together. It was written into the laws of this land in the colonial era with the first anti-miscegenation laws of the late 1600's, and has been with us in myriad forms ever since. It's about time for a change.

King's realization of the power and necessity of working together was potent, and extremely threatening to the existing structures of power & oppression. It was very likely a factor in his assassination, after which the campaign ultimately became dormant for decades, until the relaunch of the contemporary Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival with Rev Dr. William Barber and Rev. Liz Theoharis as co-chairs in 2018.

The contemporary PPC addresses systemic racism, poverty, and militarism as Dr. King's campaign did, with the addition of two pressing issues of our time, ecological devastation and the false moral narrative of religious nationalism. These are the Five Interlocking injustices that are the focus of the campaign.

We address these injustices in a number of ways:

- By building the power of those most impacted by these injustices by coming together, and working together, across all lines of division.
- By shifting the narrative about poverty; We know that blaming the poor and claiming that the United States does not have an abundance of resources to overcome poverty are false narratives used to perpetuate economic exploitation, exclusion, and deep inequality.
- And by advocating for real policies to fully address poverty and low wealth from the bottom up on the national and state level.

This may sound like a lot, but we're not aiming to replicate the work folks are already doing on individual issues. Rather, you might think of us as holding a very large umbrella, inviting people from every background to recognize the interconnection of all forms of injustice and to raise our voices all together in demand of truth and justice. This coming together is particularly essential in pivotal moments like this one.

Let's take a look at the number of voices we're talking about here: Before the pandemic there were 140 million poor & low-wealth people in this nation, people who suffered immeasurably while serving as a lifeline for this nation during the pandemic while billionaire wealth grew by over 2 trillion dollars. The needs and the demands of these 140 million people have largely been ignored by our elected officials, but 140 million people, and their allies, speaking together and voting together have the power to overcome this immoral and destructive system. The times we're in require us to wield that power now.

So, as we build a stage to lift the voices of those 140 million people, we ask all people of conscience, all moral allies, all people who believe that everyone has a right to fair wages, decent housing, and adequate health care to join your voices with us!

We all know this is a critical time with the midterm elections nearing and voting rights being eroded daily. Many of us are steel reeling from the news about the Supreme Court and the preventable tragedy that just occurred in Buffalo. It can feel hopeless, but there will always be hope, and the possibility of victory, when we come together across differences to demand justice. This is what we'll be doing in DC on June 18 for this generationally transformative March on Washington.

We do have buses traveling from across the nation and across Massachusetts, with free bus seats and food stipends available for anyone who needs them. The nearest bus stops are Northampton, and Greenfield, where I'll be getting on the bus. Many others from this area are planning to drive or take the train. I have quite a bit of written information to share with you about the march, and I'm happy to answer any questions after the service.

For now, I'd like to leave you these words from Rev. William Barber in a sermon about Matthew 25:

So in this season we must say, "America, listen! Hear yourself in the voices of the least of these. Don't turn away. Recognize that the hope of the nation is in how we treat the least of these." Remember Rabbi Heschel. Let me paraphrase what he once said: "We as a nation forfeit the right to even worship God until we do right by the least of this nation."

Brothers and Sisters, we won't be silent or unheard anymore. In this season we are saying, "If you have been rejected, it's time, on moral authority, to challenge policies that create social murder, and we must do it not as Democrats or Republicans but as human beings and moral agents. It's time to work together to save the soul of this democracy and the world. Together, we must show the nation that healing is in the very people who've been rejected leading a moral revival."

Thank you and I hope to see you in DC!