



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

Sermon May 23, 2021 Pentecost Sunday “Divine Today Also” Rev. David Jones

The other day Caity and I sat beneath the robin’s nest on our deck. And for whatever reason, maybe the devotion of the mother and father who had moved in, who have been so fearless in their work--I found myself thinking aloud about what drives us, about what it is that really we base our sense of purpose on. Because life is so short, and so fragile, and even those who attend church can rarely feel sure about what comes after this life, if anything at all does. If life is so short, so small, so uncertain, what does it really matter what we each do with our lives, lives that won’t really be remembered? Even if we are remembered by history, what is truly in our individual hearts, who we each really are, can never really be known by the next generations. Our children will remember us, but they will remember us through their eyes, not ours. Our grandchildren, our younger friends and extended families, maybe a town historian, may remember us in one way, but the whole of who we are, that deep part that we see in the mirror, that we carry with us in every experience, that cannot really be known by people we have not shared our lives with. I can’t know the inner life of my grandparents who died when I was very young. The fact that I physically resemble my mother’s father is meaningful to me because it is meaningful to her. But the fact that I would grow up to look so much like him, is not something he knew when he held me in his arms. It was not a part of what he saw in the mirror, it was not in what he carried with him in his life, the way I carry it in mine. I can ascribe all kinds of motives to the robins who are living with Caity and me right now, but I can’t possibly imagine what it is like for them to see their reflection in water--I can’t imagine what a reflection *is* to them. We try to communicate. Caity and I have been careful to reassure them they don’t need to fear us, and we pay attention to the mother in particular, if she feels secure to tend to her chicks or not. But we can’t *really* understand each other. And this little, brief encounter, this coexistence that we are navigating--it is part of my life, maybe it is part of the robin’s life though I have no idea in what sense. And when it is over, it will not be known by anyone else. Does it matter that it has happened? Does it really matter that I look like a man I can never truly know?

I think people of faith and goodwill instinctively know that the answer to these questions is ‘yes.’ Our lives do matter. What we are able to remember about our parents, or carry with us from our grandparents, what we share with our friends and neighbors, our encounters with the creatures and the trees and rivers of these hilltowns matter profoundly. We can’t necessarily explain that to one another, or even to ourselves. We just *know* it, it is something we trust; it is a faith claim, a promise that we have heard from God on the wind, or that we have read on the horizon, or divined in the fire. We simply *decide* that it matters, and we hold to that as best we can. Across generations, across forms of life, across languages, we trust that no matter what our fates will be, no matter what we will experience or not experience when we die--this life that we are given matters. That deep person that we each perhaps uniquely can see in the mirror looking back at us, is alive, and is filled with purpose and meaning. Our acknowledgement of that would seem to reflect at least something like faith in the God of Israel, faith in each other, in some other cosmic witness, that reaches beyond a mirror, beyond time, beyond Creation. It is not just something we made up; it is true, and we count on it.

I love our scripture readings this morning. They both say something very simple to us. In two very vivid stories the people are moved by wind or by breath to receive new life, and with it they receive new understanding, new intimacy, a new embodiment of the ancient covenant between God and God's people. In the valley of dry bones, the slain are resurrected; and in the place where the apostles have gathered, the followers of Christ are baptized by the holy spirit. What was dry and fading drinks from the fresh waters of life; downcast spirits and distorted language, are given new vitality and are united by the common speech and deep breath of hope. The people receive faith that they are living, that they *will* live, that a lack of understanding, even death, cannot stop God's uniting love and life within us.

The Day of Pentecost (*pentecost* means 'fiftieth') is a Christian observance, but its roots for the Jewish followers of Jesus lie in what is called the Feast of Weeks or in the festival of spring harvest, which also marks the time of God's giving of the law to Moses and the ancient Israelites on Mount Sinai. This is also associated with the practice of Jubilee, once celebrated every 50th year according to Leviticus, when all debts are forgiven and everyone who has had to sell possessions or land to survive is fully restored to those possessions and that land. Like with Easter and Passover, early Christians are consciously, intentionally, trying to show the continuity of their developing faith in Jesus with faith in the God of Israel. Here, on Pentecost, their baptism by the Holy Spirit, by the tongues of fire, is being intentionally linked to the burning bush that summoned Moses; for these early Christians, the same fire is still raging. The same breath that spoke the Creation into being, the same breath that Ezekiel prophesies for the whole of Israel, now rushes over them like a violent wind.

And in these very vivid, even kind of spooky stories of bones and tongues, we can hear the same simple message: that where God sees death and hopelessness, where God sees confusion and a lack of understanding, God resolves to give new life, fresh purpose, to the faithful--whether to the slain in the valley, or to the apostles and early Jewish Christians, or to each and every one of us today. That is God's commitment to the people of God: that we be given *life*, freely and graciously, and life *together*--whatever differences are between us, whatever sorrow we are enduring--because our bodies, our hearts, our breath, our speech, are divine. We not only matter, we matter to God. Even as the ancient Israelites are in exile, cut off from their homeland and their Temple--even as they are enduring unspeakable grief and are being oppressed by the bigger and stronger Babylonians who have forcefully displaced them--their lives matter, they have a pre-ordained dignity, and God, speaking through God's prophet, is always present to provide for their hope.

The prophet Ezekiel was a historical figure, and unlike the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, it is thought that his book was carefully put together from beginning to end and faithfully represents his prophesying to his people during the Babylonian exile. But Ezekiel did not set out to be a prophet. Ezekiel wanted to be a priest in the Temple. In exile, like his people, he is cut off from the Temple, so he must administer the rituals in other ways, and this is how we came to receive these very sophisticated, very powerful visions. This vision of the deliberate, gradual re-awakening of the slain in the valley of dry bones, has the feel of a sacrament. In our Bible study it was pointed out that Ezekiel proclaims that the dry bones *are* the people of Israel--it is mysterious how this can be true, but it might remind some Christians of the language of Communion, when we say, in imitation of Jesus, that the bread *is* Christ's body, in some mysterious way. When Ezekiel had and shared this vision of resurrection and restoration, he could not be certain that the Babylonians would succumb to the Persians and that in fact the Israelites would return to their home and rebuild. He couldn't have been certain--except through his faith. Except by simply knowing and trusting that the God of Israel would deliver them. When we administer the sacrament of Communion in our sanctuary, we can not be certain when a truly open and affirming Table, a Table of abundance and equality, will come to supplant the unequal and discriminatory tables of our world today. We simply know and trust that one day it will. We proclaim it by faith, by a faith that says all people have dignity, all people matter, and all are beloved by God. On this Day of Pentecost, we can't have all the answers, but even across generations and languages, we all can understand that quiet, bedrock faith or resolve that whatever happens, we will have life together, we will have a life that truly matters. And with that faith, we will see these prophecies fulfilled. We will be okay. Whatever comes, we will live in God forever.

And we don't have to say this lightly or naively. We can say it knowing full well that people today, like the Palestinians, are enduring exile like the ancient Israelites. And life is so magnificent, so beautiful, that it is a terrible tragedy to lose life too soon, to have it taken in a sudden accident or by illness. And it is a crime when it is taken unnecessarily either through physical violence or the violence of other kinds--the violence of poverty, the violence of judgment and prejudice, the violence of the minds and hearts that have hardened against our own people, that turn neighbors into competitors, into enemies.

But the Spirit rushes over us on the Day of Pentecost. It gathers us together, and it prophesies to us and baptizes us with the universal breath of life for all those who are breathless today, who 'grope among the dry bones of the past' and do not see that 'the sun shines today also'. Bonded by this spirit, by this common and unifying claim of faith, we will no longer have to rely on the visions of the past but each of us will have our own vision, and each of us--from the most to the least--will share equally in the fulfillment of God's love on this earth. Everything that we do matters, because each of us matters to God, because our own bones, our every breath, are divine today also.

Alleluia and amen.