



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

Sermon May 9, 2021

“The Work of Simple Love” Rev. David Jones

“Love one another,” says Jesus in the Gospel. Love one another--it sounds like such a simple thing.

Often when I have heard one of our small choir recordings that Margery has prepared, or listened to one of Amy’s virtual choir pieces, I have been struck by how seamless and how simple they have made their work sound.

But the truth is, as much as any other aspect of our church life together, the ministries of Amy and Margery--and our choir’s with them--have been transformed by the pandemic. Somehow in a year when we have had less support to provide them--lacking the sanctuary and green room for rehearsals, lacking the space in the budget for new music or collaboration, navigating a host of endlessly changing safety regulations, and new requirements like digital copyright licensing--Amy and Margery have managed, somehow, to do more with less.

Margery’s work as choir director has become a logistics one as well as an artistic and teaching one, always reaching out to potential singers, navigating conflicts in schedules, having to make sure the recording space is prepared, and that everything we can do to make this activity as safe as possible is being done. And Margery has taken great care to make sure that any choir member who wanted to participate in the small choirs would get the chance to do so. You can imagine how this complicates any recording session; each piece has to be carefully matched with the specific singers available, and this has to be balanced with a need to consider the lectionary and the liturgical calendar. Of course Margery has always spent time researching music and opportunities for her choir and our church; now she is also researching the latest studies on singing and playing instruments during this time of Covid. Margery, along with Amy, continue to hold our choir together as a community within a community, and a succession of small choirs have continued to share our large choir’s gifts with the church. The choir, with Margery’s direction, has continued to transport the congregation into the deepest meaning of our scriptures and our faith. In the midst of a pandemic, Margery has led her choir safely through yet another successful choir season.

Amy is our church musician; during choir seasons in the time before the pandemic, she joined Margery for choir rehearsals, collaborating with Margery and supporting choir singers, and she worked with me and the congregation on our hymns. But when we moved our worship online, everything changed. Because of Amy’s particular skill set and the experience she was quickly gaining in navigating online school, both as a teacher and as a parent, Amy, in addition to partnering with Margery, the choir, and I on the service, also took on the assignment of mastering Zoom and guiding me, our lay leaders, and all of us in figuring out how to make our online worship services actually work. A major part of this has been to research and monitor our digital copyright license that allows us to bring *some*--not all--of our music with us online. Amy and Octavia choose our hymns for our online services; Amy knows better than I do what hymns our congregation will recognize, to hopefully be able to join Octavia in singing them even though we don’t have our hymnals in front of us at home. And Amy has led worship on more than one occasion when I was unable to because of technical difficulties in the sanctuary. She is effectively always on standby to step in and lead.

Both Amy and Margery have consistently gone above and beyond to make worship and community happen this past year. Today of course is a day to celebrate and thank our whole choir. But we could not do

that without first celebrating and thanking our music staff. Without their creativity, determination, and selflessness--well I don't know where we would be right now in our worship life together. So thank you Margery, thank you Amy, and thank you Octavia for playing the special role you have played to make sure the whole congregation has kept singing alongside our choir.

Love one another. Though it has not been as simple as their recordings have made it sound, our church has been very well loved by our music staff this year. And our music staff was able to succeed because they were so well loved by our choir. Our choir is a diverse group, and I want to make sure we thank those choir members who decided for their own wellbeing and comfort to wait to sing until we can, one day, sing together in the sanctuary. And I want to thank the many singers who did decide to take part in our small choirs this season.

The choir's ministry, in seasons past, has been rooted in that palpable energy I get to see in the green room as they finish rehearsing on Sunday mornings. It is rooted in being one voice among many, one personality among many, one instrument among many; it is rooted in being a wide, inclusive circle, of singing to one another, listening to one another, being mutually supportive. The choir experience has always been about gathering together, in person, at the church. It would have been understandable--and I imagine there was some reluctance--if choir members let this commitment go this year. Because singing in a small group is not the same as singing in a large choir; singing on your own is definitely not the same. It's as much or even more work, but with less excitement, and perhaps less reward. This is something the staff and Deacons have talked about this year, how we are having to do more to be successful online, while accepting less personal satisfaction in our work. It's not easy to take something that is essentially about coming together, and doing it on our own instead.

And yet, our choir did sing together. Our choir did follow Margery in a new, safer model, pre-recording in smaller groups with less rehearsal. They were willing to be vulnerable, to trust their director and their peers, because singing is a great gift to the church. And this morning, as throughout this challenging choir season, the results sing for themselves. Every voice has risen to the occasion, and our recordings have been stunning. What do we remember more from our Christmas Eve and Holy Week services than the music? In a year when our church buildings were closed and it was not possible to all gather and sing at the same time, we have been treated to a huge repertoire of music that has both been honest about the present situation we are living through and courageous and skillful in preserving our traditions that have long sustained us. I think a year ago, church was tough; we just weren't ready. But when I think of this past Christmas and Easter, I hear the music first, and I am amazed by it. It sounds so simple.

The lectionary or the Spirit must have known that today is Choir Sunday. Because our reading from the Old Testament, Psalm 98, shows us where this music of our staff and choir fits in this good Creation that we call home. Psalm 98 is itself a hymn to be sung, and its words remind us how this activity, our singing and making music, is a kind of communion with all Creation. The breath we send through a flute mimics a whistling wind; the rhythm of our heart bonds us to the rhythm and sound of the seas. The more we train ourselves to sing, to dance, to make a joyful noise and move to it, the less we are a surveyor of nature and the more we become a part of it. This is what Psalm 98 tells us this morning: through music, we take our place alongside the singing hills, alongside the roaring seas and the floods that clap their hands. Through music we are more divine, we become as illuminating as the sun or moon, as ancient as the tallest trees, as young as robins just hatched this spring.

We sing and make music in church to become *more*: more of ourselves, more of each other, more of nature, more of Creation. And we can get delightfully lost in this. The sensation of becoming genuinely more of ourselves may actually feel like we are less--less self-conscious, less unsure, less caught up in our own ego, now that our breath is like the wind. Music is liberating in that way.

Love one another. It is a commandment for good reason. Because it is in believing in one another, in loving one another; it is in the beauty of the creation all around us, in the magnificence of the creatures we share this earth with, in the stars scattered across the universe; in the gathering storm on the horizon, in our awe--it is in these things that we come to believe in God's goodness. And because we trust in this,

because we hold fast to God's goodness, we know and believe that everything God has created has that same spark of goodness, that same animating, enlivening love that first made something where there had been nothing.

Singing about this is very like coming to the Communion Table, it is very much like the hope we wait on expectantly in Advent, or the new life we suddenly discover and commend in Easter: singing together is both the way we name and show our love of God, and it is a real, actual enactment and fulfillment of that love here and now like a sacrament. Every time such a diverse range of voices is gathered together and nurtured, and a sense of community and kinship is allowed to grow alongside our voices, a great thing is being done. As everyone has a place at the Table, every voice has a place in our choir.

But simple as this sounds, this takes work. Someone, or a team, must labor to prepare the feast, and someone, or a team, will be needed to set the table and invite the guests to come forward and eat. Like in Communion, it takes work and leadership and time to prepare the feast that is an anthem or an offertory. And this sacred work requires talented, dedicated, and brilliant ministers of music like our choir director, Margery, and our church musician, Amy. And it requires the dedication, and perseverance, the talent and skill, the patience and the joy, of our choir singers. If we sometimes have doubts that a better world is possible, we just need to come and worship and hear our choir *show* us that a better world is already here among us. This is the gift the choir gives us--melodic evidence of God's presence. Thank you for your time and your gifts, our faithful choir. You have served our church and our community through a time of great trouble and distress. Forgive us when we think it has been simple. But that's just how good you all are.

Alleluia and amen.