



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

Sermon June 6, 2021 Sermon “However Far, or However Near--We Must Go” Rev. David Jones

This past Monday I had the opportunity to stand with people in Springfield at a press conference held by the Poor People’s Campaign. Some of you may be aware of this organization and the work they have been doing. They’re a national, faith-based group, faithfully led especially by Rev. William Barber, who I believe was scheduled to speak in Greenfield last fall. I remember that some of you attended that event. Coordinating with local groups all across the country, they had chosen this past ‘Moral Monday’ to launch a new campaign calling on Congress to pass something called the Third Reconstruction Act.

As clergy in Western Mass, I was invited to be a moral witness to the launch of this campaign. The pastor who spoke was the Rev. Dr. L.A. Love of Alden Baptist Church, a big church in downtown Springfield. He was a very powerful speaker. And in his brief statement to the press, he called our world “beautiful but broken.” Now, if you had just been passing by on the street when this pastor spoke these words, you might not really know what they meant. You might have some guesses, but the more precise meaning of these words might remain hidden to you. Well, that person overhearing the pastor’s statement, perhaps not understanding, would have gained the understanding if they decided to stay and listen to the personal stories that were shared after the pastor had finished his remarks. One of those stories in particular has stayed with me.

After hearing several stories told by people who live in Springfield, many of them, I noted, about losing their home, about being traumatized by eviction and having to fight constantly just to get a roof back over their heads, finally a young woman stepped forward and began telling her story. I hadn’t met her before, and I guess because several stories had been shared already--and because we all had been standing under a very hot sun for nearly an hour (I think it was over 95 degrees)--I confess that my mind was beginning to wander a little bit. I was checking the time, I was thinking about stepping away to get some water, I was regretting that I had forgotten to put on sunscreen... when suddenly I heard the name ‘Ashfield.’ The woman now speaking had grown up here, and I’d find out later she had attended our church as a child. Now she lives in Greenfield, and is an organizer for the Poor People’s Campaign. And she was describing what it was like to experience poverty right here in Franklin County.

I recovered my focus, because this woman by *her* presence, by her story, was reminding me why I was there, which is because fundamentally, as we have discussed with the grant we received from the UCC, the challenges that people face in Springfield are often profoundly similar to the challenges that people face in Ashfield. There are crucial differences, we have to be careful about how to draw comparisons, we have to be mindful of how each community is distinct. But, if we are willing to be, we are *one* community here in Western Mass, and our well-being is tied together. That’s why I went to Springfield that day.

The woman told her story, an Ashfield story and a Greenfield story--a story set unmistakably in Western Mass. A story of growing up without enough firewood to get through the winter. Of having to smash furniture in the basement to have something, any piece of wood at all to heat the home with. Of skipping meals so that others in the family might not have to. And sadly these are not old stories, this was not a story from a long time ago, this is a story of life here and now, right where we worship.

I’ll be honest, that pastor’s phrase, that our world is “beautiful but broken”--sometimes, there is a tendency in our community to think that the beautiful part is here, and the broken part is there. And I

admit, when I heard the pastor use this phrase, I wasn't comfortable with that word 'broken' at first. But the pastor was talking about our economic system, and our social system, he had a new *reconstruction* on his mind and in his heart--it is the existence of discrimination, and especially the existence of poverty, that proves his words correct, that expose that there is rebuilding work to be done.

We all know how beautiful Ashfield is, we all know how beautiful the hilltowns are, we certainly know how beautiful our sanctuary is. But I'm afraid that Rev. Love's phrase, "beautiful but broken" describes our world too. Because we do live in the same one. And we know that. Knowledge of this situation is not what we are lacking. What we are lacking is knowing what exactly to do with this knowledge--or how exactly to do it. So what do we look for as we sit together in our beautiful but broken world? Where do we go from here?

In the Gospel, Jesus has a clear answer for us, and I believe it is the answer for people of faith and goodwill, whether they are far away from our church down in Springfield or whether they are our congregants or our neighbors right here on Main Street in Ashfield: the answer is always that we must go to the kin-dom of God.

Our reading from Mark this morning includes two parables, which are both shared in order to illustrate just what Jesus is on about with this talk of the kingdom of God. Jesus talks about a few different ideas in ministry, he has more than one teaching, but if there is one obsession of Jesus--one true, unrestrained passion--it is this. As George Buttrick wrote, the kingdom of God "dominates Jesus' message as a prayer-bell rules the shrines, cloisters, and courtyard of a temple."

For something he is so focused on, it is interesting that Jesus insists on describing it "in terms of startling paradox." The kingdom of God is said to be something that arrives, but also something that is already present. It can be possessed by those who are poor, and yet it must be sought by us all. It lies within all life, and yet one must also enter into it, like we might enter a country. Anyway, it is this paradoxical kin-dom that Jesus is once again trying to teach us about with these two parables in Mark this morning. Together they are only the beginning of an answer. For the rest of that answer, we have to reach a little further back in the Israelite tradition, a tradition to which Jesus certainly belongs.

But beginning with Mark, Jesus first shares a parable of spontaneous growth to illustrate how the kingdom of God works and comes about. It is like when someone scatters seed and then waits--attends to other things, lives their busy life--only to bear witness to growth happening by its own vital force. Jesus seems to say that the kingdom of God is part and parcel of the energy or force of Creation itself--it is irresistible and inevitable. Our part in it is mostly having the faith to not interfere or get in the way--to simply trust that the Creation has God's will there in the earth--and then to, with gratitude, receive the fruits of this faith. Jesus then shares maybe the more famous parable of the mustard seed, where the kingdom of God is said to be the very smallest thing, that from that humble, unassuming beginning, grows into something truly great. Here the seed is faith, and faith is the power of little things to do great things, to grow and grow until what could not be imagined becomes real.

These parables are deeply moving to me, because they remind me that Jesus--whatever any of us might decide about him in our own faith lives--he had faith, faith that was steadfast. He lived in a brutal time, a time of upheaval, a time of poverty and hardship. And he had faith. He had faith that God didn't make us for that, didn't make this world for that. And Jesus' faith was so strong, so vital, like scattered seed, it was already bringing rich and poor together to break bread, it was already creating a new kind of community that didn't exclude anyone. It was faith that drove Jesus to dine with sinners and tax collectors, to teach every member of his community of practice to pray that their debts will be forgiven as they will forgive their debtors. Jesus' faith re-constructed a true, beloved community out of the beautiful but broken communities of his world. If we are people of faith, if we are people of goodwill, why should we not have *faith* that we can do the same. If today you have a job that involves enforcing the kind of evictions the people at the press conference were suffering from, Jesus says come and break bread with the one you would evict, until you can no longer perform that job. This is the strength of Jesus' faith in the kingdom of God.

And Jesus had this faith from his ancestors in the deserts of Israel and Judah. He had this faith from the prophet Ezekiel, who in another awful time--another time when peace and justice would have been unimaginable, where things like fairness and respect could not have been more than faint memories--preached about the kingdom of God, though he didn't use that phrase. Ezekiel was prophesying in exile, so his vision was about the restoration of the Davidic dynasty, about the restoration of a united and secure kingdom. In this vision, this beautiful but broken world will be utterly transformed. For a time the first will become last and the last will become first. But through that process, we will all come to recognize each other as equals, and finally we will live like birds in a noble cedar, where we will *all* be able to rest in its shade.

You see, the kingdom of God, that Jesus describes very carefully out in public, is the seditious state of restoration, when the people are truly equal and united; *that* is the place where we must go. And to get there we will need our faith and our goodwill, we will need our stories, and we will have to share them and hear them. We will have to stand up for the people of Franklin County as well as the people of Springfield--we will need to stand up for each other, like the woman from Ashfield. That is the way the kin-dom will grow among us; that is how it can be true that the kin-dom is both already present and still to arrive, how it is the place we inherit and also the Promised Land we must wander in the wilderness to reach. Faith that we will live in the kin-dom of God together is what justifies our lives.

When I was in Springfield on such a hot day, I was reminded of my time in Jacksonville. And the stories I heard reminded me of the stories at work I would hear. I found myself wondering, why on earth, did I take a job in that warehouse after seminary that started at \$10.15 an hour. But I know why, because at that job I could meet a lot of people who had an enormous amount of power to get organized and change things, who just needed to realize it. I put up with a lot, as I've shared, to do something I believed in. So why did I leave?

I didn't leave easily. I believed in that work I was doing, but I came here because I believe in congregational ministry even more. It's probably harder, because we have such a diverse mix of people. It's pretty easy when you're surrounded by people all doing the same crummy job for 10 bucks an hour to figure out what you maybe have in common. But we don't have that in churches, right, churches are open to all. Some of us in church are just scraping by (I know many of us could tell the same stories I heard on Monday), and then some of us have never really felt what that's like. That's a big difference in experience, and we can expect it will mean a very big difference in perspective.

This is why faith matters. Because whatever else separates us, I do believe we have faith in common. It may not be the exact same faith, each of us may use different language, we may be theistic or pantheistic or atheistic, but we have a common faith that justice can and will prevail--that fairness and kindness will prevail--and that in that faith, like a mustard seed, will one day become the kin-dom of God, with its strong branches, where we will each nest and have shade, and whether our bodies are big or small, black or white, whether we are gay or straight or trans--we will all of us live safe and free, falling asleep easily by the night's quiet calm, and waking up rested with the din of daybreak, overjoyed for another day to live as a child of God in this beautiful world.

Alleluia and amen.