



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

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“Freedom and Affirmation” Rev. David Jones

I remember in my first year at divinity school in Toronto, like every student, I was asked many times to share my faith journey. And a big part of my story was about being *hesitant*: hesitant about joining the Church, and even more hesitant about admitting I had joined it, let alone pursuing ordained ministry. And without really thinking of it, I developed a habit of using the word “affirmed;” that is, how being in Toronto at the kind of divinity school I was in, with fellow students, how suddenly *affirmed* I felt in my identity.

I had only very reluctantly told friends of mine what I was about to do, and each time I did, I remembered why I was so hesitant. My friends would immediately assume all kinds of things about me—things they had to know were not true, from years of knowing me, but their understanding or their impression of the Church always seemed to override everything else. They had an idea fixed in their minds about what it means to be a Christian, or what kind of person becomes a minister, and as soon as I used these words, that fixed idea blocked their view of me.

So I stopped telling people. When I made a new friend and they asked what I was going to do with my life, I would often just say that I was studying “theology”. “Does that mean you’re going to become a minister?” they’d ask. “Well, maybe, that’s one possibility,” I would say. “Or maybe I’ll stay in school and teach, we’ll see.”

It was only in class, at the divinity school, that I could be really honest about what I was pursuing and why. And so I would say how important that was in my story, to finally feel affirmed in who I was becoming. But when I spoke like this, I realized classmates and professors responded somewhat vaguely to me, they would look at me like they were awaiting further clarity. At a very Open and Affirming divinity school, I kept telling everyone how “affirmed” I felt. It finally dawned on me that people were assuming I was telling both a faith journey *and* a coming out journey. I felt awful! I wasn’t worried about what people thought about my identity, but I really worried that I had accidentally appropriated language that in this new context had a specific meaning. So for a while I stopped saying I felt so “affirmed” in my identity.

But a friend of mine in school with me, one of the few students younger than me—a preacher’s kid, and someone I really looked up to—detected my shift in language. And they said, it’s true that Open and Affirming *is* a movement in the Church to break the discrimination and oppression of LGBTQ peoples, but it is also a spiritual movement that the contemporary Church did not start and certainly cannot contain. It is, in its potential, a movement for all people to stand in solidarity together. My friend was so committed to Open and Affirming not only because of the unity it was spreading among oppressed peoples, but also because it represented a new kind of community. By choosing to belong in this community, whatever one’s identity it was newly consecrated, newly celebrated and recognized in its uniqueness and preciousness to a God who created us all.

And actually it was around this time that the community started to speak of itself as LGBTQIA+—to extend the coalition to explicitly include authentic allies. My friend was suggesting to me that perhaps if I felt so affirmed being in a church community that was so open and affirming, that something about my identity was being affirmed, and I could choose to describe my faith journey in the language that I

was most comfortable with. Because in the beloved open and affirming community, we will all belong, we will all be invited to be and to speak, and we will all be listened to and respected.

I think Caity and I feel this more than ever right now, expecting a child – it is more significant, not less, to enter into and support a partnership and to start a family, knowing that all kinds of partnerships and families are possible and beloved by God. Caity and I still don't know the sex of our baby, we aren't sure if we will hold out or if curiosity will get the better of us. But understanding that sex and gender are not the same thing deepens our affection for the unique child we will have. Our decision to "find out" or not to is not as important to this child's well being and wholeness as taking care to raise them in an open and affirming household. God will be alive in them in the whole person that they gradually become, in the meaning they make for their own name in their own time. As Paul writes to the Galatians, "for freedom" we have been set free. Real freedom is about freely participating in the affirmation of children and everyone else that we meet.

I suspect the experience of being uneasy or hesitant to admit that we go to church or belong to a church or sing at church is pretty common in this congregation. And maybe that experience gets triggered when we have a week like we have had in this country, when religion and scripture and churches get invoked in so many different and divisive ways. Whether you are – more conservative in your beliefs or more progressive, whether you consider yourself a Christian who goes to church or a follower of the religion of Jesus who does, or whether you go to church or sing in a church as a person of a different religion or no religion, we probably all have times, in certain places or certain company, where we'd rather not say we are active at a church. Maybe because we have a real fear of what this might lead to in the conversation, or maybe because our own comfort in this fact remains tenuous, or maybe it is because you just know the self-reliant person you're speaking to is going to suddenly speak condescendingly to *you* who is so vulnerable to *need* God or to *need* a sanctuary, or a prayer or a hymn. Or maybe it is because of a Supreme Court decision.

Today in our Gospel reading, there is a moment when Jesus, preparing to enter into a Samaritan village, is turned away. His disciples immediately leap to angry judgment, and ask their teacher if they should bring fire down on this village for their slight against their teacher. Jesus is incredulous, annoyed; he rebukes them and moves on.

In the Gospel of Luke, the people of Samaria will be encountered on three separate occasions. This one we read of today is the first, when Jesus is denied entry into their village. It would not be surprising to his Jewish followers; there was great enmity between the Jewish and Samaritan people. Jesus' followers despised and distrusted Samaritans, viewed them as beneath them, and the Samaritans in turn harbored their own hostility. The disciples probably felt that Jesus attempting to speak with Samaritans and teach them was an act of immense generosity, and a last chance for the Samaritans to redeem themselves; that having rejected this offer, it was time for consuming fire—what else could God do for them?

But Jesus' eyes have seen a new kind of community. He, as well as his followers, would understand the history and tension between these peoples. He hopes to go among them and heal this conflict. But he understands it is the conflict—it is history, religion, ideology, competition—that has riven the Jewish people from the Samaritan, not God. In God there is no Jew and Samaritan. Jesus is content to move on because even if his followers and the villages are not ready to hear it, a new community is beginning to come into view.

In the next instance of the Samaritan people in Luke, we get the famous parable of the Samaritan, when Jesus subversively shows that a Samaritan can be the better, more righteous man than even Jewish priests. Unlike the priests, the Samaritan is able to throw off the yoke of the law, can set aside moralism and norms, can dispense with concern for purity or ritual or status in order to pay attention and therefore to devote himself to the person in danger. The Samaritan, against the disciples' expectations, is the one who affirms the inherent merit of a fellow human, a fellow child of God, and delivers him into the undeserved grace of God, the undeserved gift of life.

As word spreads about the strange and subversive teachings of Jesus and this new affirming community he is building in the countryside and in the city, everyone, even in Samaria is catching wind of it. And when the third incident finally comes later in Luke's account, Jesus is healing 10 lepers, some of the most marginalized people of his time. And among them is a Samaritan. After Jesus has performed this miracle, *only* the Samaritan affirms what Jesus has done; only the Samaritan gives him thanks. Maybe because only someone who has been so marginalized, can really understand what Jesus' ministry is about.

In our Gospel reading today, we see that Jesus is patient with those who are marginalized and outcast, but he is stern with his own followers who seem content with the world as it is, who simply want to behave according to established conventions. Jesus feels that they are making a choice not to be a part of this new kin-dom of heaven on earth. In a real and tragic sense this choice means they are dead already, and "the dead can bury their own dead." But those of us who are alive, who see the beloved community drawing nearer over our own hills, we *are* needed – and we are needed in the Church.

My faith journey is still one of hesitation. But justified as that unease is in our world today – in our world this very week – let us not make the mistake that I nearly did at divinity school. This church in Ashfield affirms us all; it attaches our unique identity to a vast movement, and makes a place of belonging for each of us in the beloved, open and affirming community that people inside and outside of the Church are busy building. Regardless of sexuality or gender identity, regardless of race or nationality or religion, what we do here together has been going on for sometime now. And the head of the Church is this teacher who respects and understands our unease, who is patient with the scope of history and the depths of our division if not with the failure to repair it.

It is our unease that this teacher asks of us. Because this particular unease is only the humility to pay attention to ourselves and each other, and *from that* to become devoted to what is really important. For freedom, we are all here. So when I tell someone I go to church, I'm going to try saying more, not less. I go to an Open and Affirming church, a church that strives to stand with anyone, anywhere who is working to bring love and justice to earth as it is in heaven. That anyone, anywhere is welcome here with us.

Alleluia and amen.