



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

Sermon June 27, 2021 “For God Created All Things So That They Might Exist” Rev. David Jones

This reading from the Wisdom of Solomon is remarkable. It is remarkable, for one thing, in not actually appearing in every edition of the Bible. This Jewish text, written in the 1st century BCE, was never actually canonized in the Hebrew Bible. Christians, for their part, have not been sure what to make of it. Often it has been left out altogether.

But just in this very short passage, this text makes three really striking claims: That God did not make death; that in Creation there is such a thing as immortality; and that death, this thing that God did not make, only comes into the world by what the writer calls “the devil’s envy.” These are very big, very deep claims--and they seem incorrect. Just on the surface, clearly death *is* a part of life. Not only do humans die, but it seems all things that live will die. How could God have made all of this, and not be said to also have made death? And, what does the devil have to do with an accident, or an illness, that causes a person to die? What does the devil have to do with old age? What does the devil have to do with the life and death of birds or other creatures in our midst? On the surface, this passage seems fanciful, even willfully ignorant, as if the author has buried his head in the sand to protect his eyes and heart from the very real cycles of life and death that are all around us.

On the other hand, in this day and age, we do actually understand that each of us is made up of countless unseen particles, endless actions and reactions, and energy that is mystifying. Our bodies appear like independent, finite things, but scientifically and medically speaking, we know--we especially know after the year we have been through--that that’s misleading. We know that our bodies are porous, that there is an artificiality in thinking that our bodies are discrete, that they are our own.

As we grow up, to navigate the world, to make sense of our feelings--both physical and spiritual--we begin to tell a story about who we each are. I tell a story of David Jones, that helps *me* to make sense of how I feel and what I’m experiencing. Certainly that story will one day come to an end. I hope a long time from now, but life is precious, it is short; at some point, my life--the story--of David Jones will end. But the particles that are bonded together, the water that my body holds, the energy and the sparks that fire to move me and explain myself to myself, all of that--or much of that--can continue, even when my story stops.

I was watching the birds in my front yard the other day, robins and cardinals, a small hummingbird and a giant hawk overhead. I thought of the seed that they carry, that spreads the life of trees and the fruits they will bear. Then I watched the honeybees buzzing in our sage; we call them John’s bees, because we think they belong to John’s, he’s a beekeeper who lives just a few houses up the street. And then I was at our Bible Study on Thursday, and Berkely quoted a Buddhist monk, who said that “If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper.” And then Berkeley passed along the longer passage it is from, appearing in Thich Nhat Hanh’s book called “No Death, No Fear:”

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper.

And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. [...] As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

Maybe today's scripture passage is not so naive. Maybe it is just that with Wisdom, Solomon's or Thich Nhat Hanh's, we can begin to see through what is just on the surface in front of us, see through the cycle of life and death, like a thin sheet of paper, into the whole universe it contains.

This doesn't mean that with Wisdom there is no longer pain or suffering in the world, these don't just disappear because we start to see the world with greater depth. Actually with Wisdom, the pain and suffering in the world becomes even greater; in that thin sheet of paper is also that logger's working conditions, his wages, whether he is treated with respect and dignity, whether he is allowed to understand himself as a child of God or is persecuted and marginalized because of his sexuality. In that sheet of paper is also our equality and inequality: will the logger get to use that paper to write his own story, to share the story of his life with all these generative forces of the world that will live on forever? Does *he* get to live on forever with them? Will the gay or gender non-conforming child of God, called to be a minister, ever get to turn that paper into a sermon or a prayer? Will they ever receive that paper as a letter, affirming who they uniquely are, who God carefully and lovingly made them to be? Will that paper ever be addressed properly to them, with the respect of the pronouns they choose? Will it ever protect them from discrimination in their housing and healthcare? When will that thin sheet of paper, containing everything in the universe, contain the immortal righteousness of love and justice and freedom for all?

With Wisdom we can begin to see that God does not make death. That's not the same as saying there isn't going to be pain, heartbreak, grief; to say that God did not make death, that the forces of this world are wholesome, is not to say that we will not experience loss. We will experience loss because part of this wholesome life is making sense of our place in the universe; part of it is telling these important, meaningful stories. My arm may be countless particles, but when it is injured, I, David, am injured. Me and everything that makes me now come into communion; we stand in solidarity. My body's pain is my own. My pain is my body's. *That* is whole-some, and sadly wholesome is not painless. When I die, my body will die; when what makes up my body lives on in the soil and in the air, I will live on in the soil and in the air.

This is all good news, I think. But our scripture today doesn't give us only good news, it also gives us worrying news, though we've already heard it. Somehow, even though God doesn't make death, death has come into Creation. Our writer, a little too casually for us I'd imagine, attributes this to "the devil's envy." Anytime we see the word 'devil' in scripture, or 'Satan', there is a lot to unpack. We should just know today that the word we have translated in our English bibles as 'the devil' is actually the Greek word *diabolos*, which means 'the slanderer.' This is the word that ancient Greek translators used for the Hebrew word for satan (*ha-satan*), which means the accuser or the opponent. The word satan is used sparingly in the Old Testament to describe someone who opposes the protagonist of a given story. The satan could be an individual person, or it could be a nation opposing God's people.

In this reading today, the protagonist is Wisdom and the people of God who seek and find it, who, because they learn to see deeply, discover that in a thin sheet of paper the entire universe is contained. And the devil, then, is simply the person, or the country, or the laws, or the ideology--or, yes, the *religion*--

that opposes and subverts this discovery. Since we are all made in God's image, and since all the generative forces of this world--all that's happening inside us and around us seen and unseen--is wholesome, the devil is anyone or anything that would seek to take that child of God out of that thin sheet of paper. The devil is the Christian church or a union that says a gay or trans- worker does not matter, does not have protection from discrimination, and doesn't have a place in our communion and solidarity. This is a religious concern, because God's immortality, God's image, all that God has made so that it might exist--the diversity of love, the diversity of bodies, the diversity of sexuality--all these wholesome forces are at stake. And anyone or anything that opposes that diversity, that denies it, harms it, rejects it, they introduce death where God intends only life.

The author of our scripture today says that righteousness *is* immortality. In other words, immortality means relationship with God. That relationship can be up and down, it can be painful or difficult, but so long as we keep some faith, as long as we keep searching for Wisdom, as long as we recognize the integrity and the dignity of each other, as long as we celebrate all Creation in its myriad and diverse and unique expressions, we will have immortality. Immortality is a relationship.

So what is death? Death is a rejection of a relationship. And if you are so insecure, so selfish, if, like Cain in the story of Cain and Abel, you become violent, and you seek not Wisdom and wholesome-ness but domination and individual-ness--if you forsake your LGBTQ siblings, if you then forsake the God whose image your siblings were made in--you cannot have immortality. The generative forces of this world will simply have no use for you.

But the rest of us, the people of *this* church and this faith community, this community of goodwill, we *will* have eternal life. We will make sure that everyone will get to tell their story, we will follow Wisdom into the depths of each other's joys and pains, and every loss will be acknowledged and honored and celebrated. The death introduced into this world by homophobia and transphobia will be overcome, and that thin sheet of paper will soon announce a new covenant, that is already inscribed on the hearts of the truly faithful, that all are welcome here, that all have a place at our Table, and that every kind of love and identity will stand in solidarity together. Because this is God's Creation not the devil's.

Alleluia and amen.