



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

Sermon June 6, 2021 “They Have Not Rejected You / So We Do Not Lose Heart” Rev. David Jones

I wrote an entire other sermon this week from the one I’m going to share now. I wrote it before this one. In it I tried to dig deep into this very ancient story we read from 1 Samuel, and then I tried to explore the parallels between it and our letter by Paul to the Corinthians--parallels that I confess were not easy to come up with! But I decided I would save that one for another time because it was far too long for a Communion Sunday. Instead I’d like to just reflect on two phrases that jumped out to me, one from each of our readings this morning.

The first is this phrase, that God speaks to Samuel: “They have not rejected you.” Samuel is disheartened that his people are clamouring for a king. He has served the people very well as a ‘judge of Israel’--a kind of leader unique to the ancient Israelites, who could mediate internal disputes and rally the people to defend themselves from outside invasion, but who otherwise did not rule over them--unlike a king would, which the people are now demanding.

Samuel is saddened by this development. And like a lot of us who feel sad, he decides to pray. And our passage includes this prayer in the form of a dialogue Samuel has with God. And there is this very touching verse, where God senses the sadness of Samuel, God sees the weight Samuel is carrying; and God is moved to remove the burden of failure from Samuel’s aging shoulders. It is not Samuel, as the last in a long succession of ‘judges,’ who has failed to keep the faith of his people; no, God says to Samuel, “they have not rejected you,” but rather they have rejected me. And God is not just being kind to Samuel. God has been the king of Israel since God freed the Hebrews from Egypt. God has had prophets and priests, God has chosen and guided good judges and broken off ties with poor ones, but only God has been the true sovereign. If the people now want a king, in God’s view, this means they have rejected God’s kingship in favor of a human one. They don’t want the king who freed them from Pharaoh; they want their own Pharaoh.

I find myself very grateful for God’s dialogue with Samuel. What Samuel is doing here in trying to take on all the weight of this rejection onto himself is actually what he has been doing for his whole adult life. Samuel is being a good judge, he is mediating a dangerous conflict between his people and their God. Samuel knows that if he can be blamed for the people’s demand, then he can protect the people from disappointing God. And if he can take on all the blame for this, he can also protect God from disappointing the people. But God doesn’t accept this outcome. It is not Samuel’s job, nor is it within his power, to shield the people from their error. And as God explains, the result of this error will be, in the end, that the people’s cries will go unheard. The people will have cut themselves off from God, and there is to be no confusion about who is responsible for that.

I have heard stories from friends over the years, when they have tried to be like Samuel, trying to shield parents or grandparents or friends or employers from the truth, trying to shield the truth from God, trying to take on and absorb and bear the rejection of others. But God will have none of it, not the God we know and worship in this church. Our God does not hesitate to answer *our* prayer and to be very clear about this: when someone in our midst--someone we know and love, someone we work with, or someone who is a complete stranger--when they think they are rejecting us because of who we are, when they deny us our human rights and a fair share in God’s abundance, our God’s Spirit rushes to meet our spirit and says

“they are not rejecting you, rather they are rejecting me.” And more than this, our God rushes to confront that person whose heart has been hardened like Pharaoh’s, and issues a warning: when that person who has rejected God cries out because of the loneliness and misery of the path they have chosen, God will not be there to answer them.

This makes me think of Rev. Linda, my minister in Jacksonville, Florida, and all the churches she might have so lovingly served--all the people her kindness might have saved, that her devotion and faith might have transformed, all the burdens she might have removed from so many congregants; but those churches rejected God instead. They thought they were rejecting her, because she was a woman. Then they thought they were rejecting her, because she was a gay woman. The whole time they were rejecting God. There are whole generations of ministers and congregants in this country who had to seek to fulfill their vocations while being made to feel rejected; God’s clear answer to their prayers--like to Samuel’s--and their faith to hear that answer, should be celebrated today as we mark Pride Month in the church.

In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is characteristically annoyed at the early Christians he addresses. Now we need to remember that Corinth was a notorious city in the first century, well known for what has been described as “the sordidness of its rich and the misery of its poor.” It was, in a very unequal world, a particularly unequal city. As with his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing partly in response to complaints he has received from some of the poorer members of the community, about how they have been mistreated and disrespected by members of the community with more prestige and higher social status. And in this second letter it is clear that this disrespect is also being directed at Paul himself; it seems this Corinthian church has been visited by other ministers, with other teachings, and some of the more prestigious members of the church regret that Paul is not more like them, not more elegant in his speech and not traveling with the proper letters of recommendation. Paul is writing to remind them all, rich and poor, that none of them have anything real to boast about, none of them are better than the other, no one is more or less important. Paul is writing to remind them who they worship: not a prestigious man, not a man elegant in speech, not a man with this or that credential, but a working man, and a man put to death by the rulers of this world--a death overturned by God--in order to inaugurate a ministry of true justice. Not the false justice of our laws or social categories, but the true justice that is God’s will. Our movement for LGBTQ rights--in and outside of the church--has always known the difference between these.

And it is in this context that Paul uses the halting phrase, “and so we do not lose heart.” There is a tremendous amount of hardship in this life. It is almost always unfair, too. And this is true of ministry and our life together in the church--it is often very difficult and unfair. Paul is critical of this community that he founded for failing to reconcile to one another, for allowing the outer nature--the inequality all around us--to interfere with the renewal of our inner nature, the essential equality we have as children of God. And yet, if we refuse to reject God--and therefore if we refuse to reject one another; if we refuse to smuggle the world’s inequality into our churches and into our worship and instead carry the equality of the church out into the world--if that is what we remain committed to however often we stumble or fail or hide from this commitment, like we once hid from God in the garden of Eden--then we can not lose heart.

Practically speaking, from day to day, when someone rejects us, or discriminates against us, of course we will lose heart, of course we will feel discouraged, of course we will cry out to God. But unlike those who have rejected God, choosing a new Pharaoh over the God who frees us from Pharaohs--who frees us from inequality--God *will* answer our cries. God will seek us out, God will meet us in our prayers, God will say exactly what God was saying to Paul to keep him going in his work, and that he says to the Corinthians, “we do not lose heart.” Our inner nature continues to resist and to protest and to march and even to win here in this world.

So, do not lose heart, know that we are *not* the ones rejected; that we are *all* chosen by God, whatever anyone else may say or think or try to do. For freedom in our lifetimes, let us wish one another a very happy Pride Month. And let us continue to say,

Alleluia and amen!