



First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
Creating Community, Welcoming All

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, July 10, 2022

“A Person to Follow” Rev. David Jones

There is a lot going on in the parable of ‘the Good Samaritan,’ much that we could put into context, but it is pretty clear what is happening and what is being taught: in a dangerous world, on a particularly dangerous road, loving your neighbor as yourself—the thing Jesus commands—has a concrete meaning. It has nothing to do with status or profession, nothing to do with nationality or religion; loving your neighbor as yourself means paying attention, crossing the street, drawing near enough to be moved by them. In our translation today, it says that the Samaritan “was moved with pity” by the situation of the man who is in distress. Other translations say the Samaritan “felt compassion.” The Greek word being translated, the roots of it, actually refer to the internal organs, so what the verse is really saying is that the Samaritan is so affected by what he sees, is so deeply attentive and connected to the distress of this man left on the side of the road, that his own body is responding, he is having an intense physiological response. This is always the danger of translating—the words pity or compassion are both good translations but they almost sanitize what is really happening. What is really happening in the Greek testament is that the Samaritan is physically sick or physically distressed by the situation. He is literally unable to control his reaction, it is beyond virtue or ethics, it is that the Samaritan is so enmeshed, so near to this stranger’s distress that he also is in distress. It is not that the Samaritan is kinder or more magnanimous, it is not that he is wiser or cleverer or more faithful; it is that it is his nature, his body itself, that cannot ignore or tolerate distress in another. The agony of the beaten man, caught up and victimized by the danger of this world, is now inside the Samaritan’s own stomach. He has no choice but to attend to it. This is how Jesus Christ defines being a neighbor. And this is what he commands of us.

We are neighbors of Caroline Murray. I hesitate to even say it, because I know how uncomfortable it feels; but it is exactly by how much we are physically affected by the suddenness of Caroline’s death that we know beyond any shadow of a doubt that we were her neighbor in this life. The physical pain, the lack of sleep, the shock, how frightening these days have been: I am afraid this is part of being a person of faith; it is what being a neighbor feels like.

This week we have been forced down the road to Jericho; like the Samaritan, we cannot just pass by, we cannot just hew to the other side of the road and avoid this distress. We had no choice but to cry out, no choice but to become angry, no choice but to break down and run aground, to bump into something we could not see, for the breadth of the vision of our dear neighbor and friend.

I am sorry to churn up this unease. But I want you to know how righteous you have been, how thoroughly you have kept faith this week in all that you have felt and done. We have been making our way down a dangerous road, but we have had no choice but to go. I am thankful we have gone together.

Martin Luther King once preached about this parable, and he said the difference between the Samaritan, and the priest and Levite, was that instead of asking “what will happen to me?” if I go down this dangerous road, he asked, “what will happen to the man on the side of the road if I don’t go?” That is the question that a neighbor dares to ask. If we do not become neighbors, we will not experience true life; we will not make it to Jericho or Jerusalem or wherever it is that we are going as the beloved children of God; we’ll have become something else, something less. As King said in his sermon, Jesus pulls the questions of right and wrong from mid-air and places them right in the gut, right in the

stomach, where a person of faith no longer has a choice, but only the freedom to do what *feels* and what *is* right.

How did we all become neighbors of Caroline? Well partly it is probably because many of us have been the person at the side of the road, the one who has felt beaten down, who feels left behind, who feels passed by. Many of us have been hungry or cold, have struggled with feeling judged, with being judged; many of us have been weak, or low, or dispirited. Many of us have worried we were unimportant or not part of something. And for some of us—not all of us of course, Caroline was only one person—but certainly for a good number of us, it was Caroline who crossed the street. It was Caroline who sought us out to say “good job,” or to accompany us and relate to us, who didn’t just listen to you but acted on what she heard. It was Caroline who made sure the church was full of socks and warm clothes in the cold winter. It was Caroline who fought for a mission, who urged us to move steadily into a deeper commitment to the community and charity. And for so many of us, it was her combination, her blend of honest opinion and sincere caring—of a vision for the church and a willingness to directly *do it*—that made her an inspiration, that made her a person to admire. Caroline was willing to take on the big, dreaded task that with her good and willing leadership would bring joy and prosperity to the church. She made us neighbors to people we have not even met.

All of us were blessed to be Caroline’s partners in ministry. And I know she felt blessed to be partners of ours. The church is a tool to care and to do for others, and each of us is what—or who—the church *is*. The church is for every member and friend, and it is for all who share these beautiful hilltowns with us. I liked what George said about her at the recent fall festival meeting: Caroline could quietly steer us, and, somehow, seemingly without much effort.

I can see Caroline now, a good Samaritan, showing us to be a good samaritan church, to cross the street and tend to whoever is in need. Though she is suddenly lost, her example, her teaching, her relationships are physically present. As her neighbors, we cannot help but to feel this loss in our gut. But in the mysterious way of Creation, that is proof that she will never really be gone.

With thanksgiving for this wonderful woman and dear friend, forever a person to follow,

Alleluia and amen.