



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

Sermon August 8, 2021 “There Is Forgiveness With You” Rev. David Jones

I’ve always had a bit of an uncertain relationship with prayer. I have this vivid memory in my first semester in my first year of seminary. Our class broke into small groups and our task was very simple: to gather in a circle and, one after the other, offer a prayer for the person next to you. In order to do this, we first went around, and one after the other, we each shared something about our lives. Like we do every Sunday, shared side by side, it could be something joyful or sorrowful; it could be about a relationship, or about a personal success or failure. Once everyone had shared, it was time to pray. And now you would not speak for yourself but you would pray for the person to your left.

You know I did not grow up in the church. It goes too far to say that I never prayed growing up, but to pray openly, in public, where someone else could hear me--let alone to pray on behalf of someone else--that was entirely foreign to me. As I realized what the assignment was, I became nervous. And I froze. I don’t remember what I shared about myself, but more importantly, I didn’t remember at that moment what *anyone* had shared. I was so distracted, by the time it came around for me to pray for the person to my left, I couldn’t think of anything. I started okay, but quickly I lost it. I hadn’t been listening. And if you hadn’t been listening, you couldn’t pray.

It became a teaching moment for everyone: this exercise was not about how you prayed, it had nothing to do with the words you chose, what structure you used, how you named or described God. This exercise was about how you listened. I couldn’t listen to someone else, because I was too busy listening to myself. And that is only another way of saying, in that moment, whatever the reasons, I listened to my neighbor carelessly. I heard that my neighbor spoke, I heard the sound, my ears were working; but the sound of their voice wasn’t important to me at that moment, and I nodded along thoughtlessly, never giving the sound I heard an opportunity to *become meaning* that I could listen for.

I can rationalize it and say I was busy listening to something or someone else--and I was! That’s a fair description of what happened. My professor said exactly that, as she saw I was beating myself up over it: we are doing this to practice, to learn by doing, to discover for ourselves what it takes to pray for someone else. It was a classroom exercise, and there was no real harm done. I don’t think I was the only one who had trouble with this exercise, nor would I be in our busy, pressure-filled society. Unfortunately in our world it is a very easy mistake to make, to listen more to the internal racket of the world’s expectations than to someone next to me who simply needs not to be judged at all. Our world doesn’t really reward that. Far better to focus on yourself.

But, obviously, all of that hasn’t made this memory go away. I still, years later, feel bad for my role in this assignment. I think about what it must have been like for the other person, also in their first year of seminary, to share something to a group, to entrust it to the person next to you, only to be the one person who’s courageous sharing goes unheard and unacknowledged, to have their story sit there in the middle of that circle and not receive the prayer it deserved. But if that were all I remembered about that assignment, I wouldn’t be sharing it with you today. This difficult memory does not end there.

Because after we had finished the exercise, the person I let down came over to me. I was apologetic of course, but they stopped me. They had listened to me, and they had listened very well. They heard how nervous I was when I shared, and they heard even more how nervous I was when I attempted to pray. They

didn't come over to forgive me for my error; there was nothing to forgive. And they knew that, because they had really listened; they had listened with care and with thoughtfulness. I had disappointed only myself, caught up in all my own self-judgment, and then I compounded this by projecting this self-judgment onto the others in the circle, making the assumption that they must also have been terribly let down. But in a prayer circle there shouldn't be any judgment at all. Judgment has its place in life and in community, but its place is *not* in a prayer circle. Listening especially, and then maybe responding, maybe challenging your friend or your neighbor to try and go a little deeper, to try to see something that they are not yet seeing-- those things could be appropriate, but not condemning, not abandoning or giving up, those things don't belong.

From an assignment that I mistook for being about how well I prayed, I discovered you cannot pray at all if you don't first listen. And then, after my classmate's pastoral visit, I realized that communal prayer-- prayer that builds up and makes a difference in our lives--is about creating a space and a time without judgment. When we trust that that space exists and that we are truly welcome in it, that we have a right to it, and a responsibility to others gathered once we enter into it, that is sanctuary.

Today we read our Psalmist praying fervently to God. The Psalmist and God create sanctuary together. In this space, the Psalmist confesses that he or she could not stand up to the Lord's scrutiny, that like all the people of ancient Israel, there is guilt and regret on their mind. But this is sanctuary, so God is not judging; God is only listening. And the Psalmist is preparing for and hoping for and longing for God's response and challenge. The unequal world that has been made, to which the Psalmist belongs, cannot stand; an age where the people live in their daily lives just as they do in their sanctuary is coming, when the iniquity that humanity has made will be bought back or re-deemed by God. What has been unfair will be made fair--the mighty brought low, and the low raised up.

We can imagine that that process will not be viewed the same by the mighty as by the low. But we can rest assured that throughout that process there will be sanctuary. There will be prayer, built on listening, built on releasing each other from our self-judgments, where we can share honestly and without fear. With God, through prayer, there is forgiveness. But God isn't the one who does the forgiving. God is the keeper, our partner, in creating sanctuary. God does not judge us in here, in our houses of prayer. The forgiveness that is possible with God, that our Psalmist names here, is the forgiveness of *ourselves* when we feel we have let others down. With *that* forgiveness, we can listen to others and we can build sanctuary together.

And if we build sanctuary, if we are praying with each other regardless of what each of us has done or earned or believed, regardless of how each of us loves or looks, we are building the base, the community and the web of steadfast love that can carry us through God's disruptive work. We will need that base, we will need our prayers and our sanctuary. Because we do live in a world of iniquity, like the Psalmist, and the only way for a loving God, who listens and cares and responds to all our prayers, is to redeem us, to make the mighty and haughty low and humble, and to raise up the weak and humble into new strength and pride. This is the great work of the Church, to teach and to practice self-forgiveness, so that God's love can change the world.

Alleluia and amen.