



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

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

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“Stewardship of God’s Faith” Rev. David Jones

Sometimes we will ask another person or Nature if God is real, or we ask if someone believes in God. Often, we ask or wonder this about ourselves or our parents or friends new and old, not from any scruple or desire to judge, but out of a bottomless curiosity to know ourselves or another as deeply as possible. What is really making us tick? ‘What do you want to do with your life,’ or ‘who do you want to be,’ or ‘why’ (*why* are we alive, *what* is life *for*) -- these are the related, unfathomable questions that start early in life and never end.

I remember, maybe in the second grade, a friend of mine sitting next to me on the school bus asked me another unfathomable question: did I believe in Santa Claus? (I have enjoyed thinking about this cold, wintry question during this heat wave, and I wanted to share it with you for the same reason). At seven years old, this question was a common source of contention among my classmates. We were probably not aware that only some people celebrate Christmas, and only some of those people have the story of Santa Claus. In any case, many of us investigated this question with great seriousness, using various methods of inquiry at our disposal—sneaking around on Christmas Eve to make a definitive discovery, or examining the milk and cookies or the carrots for reindeer, searching the lawn for hoof-prints.

My big sister lost faith in Santa when she was relatively young. She believed so deeply, so purely in Santa that she never told our parents what she most desired to receive for a gift. All her childhood, she wrote letters and whispered to Santa’s spirit, imploring him to deliver a child-sized, motorized Jeep. She hoped to find it without wrapping except for a bow under the Christmas tree. My sister was a great explorer, and while she valued her bike and could make due with attaching a wagon to it, she was ready to travel a little further, and she knew from experience that she would need four-wheel drive on the roads ahead of her—plus she liked the look of a Jeep. In her mind’s eye, she saw herself at the wheel of a Jeep, somehow that was her at her innermost, her most essential, as Santa would well know. Despite her infinite hope and her devotional discretion, her Jeep never arrived on Christmas morning.

My belief in Santa went on much longer because I figured out early on that my mom and dad had a backchannel, a direct line to the workshop. And I was more of an intellectual where my sister was the adventurer. I had done the investigation, I had conducted the trials. More than once I closely inspected the snow and found ample evidence of reindeer eating the carrots I had laid out, and actually it wasn’t too difficult to find this evidence because they made a bit of a mess of them. Curiously, they seemed to use a peeler, like my mom did when she prepared carrots for dinner, and so there were carrot shavings everywhere. Plus, I watched the news, I read the papers, I knew Santa was sighted every year by meteorologists, and often on Christmas Eve the local news would interrupt their coverage, breaking the story of where Santa was precisely in the world at that moment. So, from this position of reason and science, I realized if I slipped a long list to my parents, surely Santa would find it in his jolly heart to bring me at least one of my hoped-for treasures, and he did.

So, I confidently answered my friend on the bus: “Yes, my dear friend, I am quite certain of Santa Claus.” But for the first time in my life, immediately after I answered, he asked me, ‘does that mean that you also believe in God?’ Well, I wasn’t so sure. I didn’t have a clue where or how to open an

investigation into that one; sadly, the meteorologists were silent, maybe fearing reprisals, and God was not purported to use a peeler.

I knew I liked the look of churches, the way my sister liked the look of a Jeep. I remember liking the idea of God, but I knew my friend was asking a much harder question. I went back to my answer about Santa Claus for the duration of that bus ride, laying out the preponderance of evidence. But, it would take me another almost 20 years to give something like an answer to his second question, a tentative 'yes.' And just about every year since has been a process of re-tracing my own steps before taking new ones, answering it all over again. I have never become as certain of God as I was of Santa Claus, but at some point that became part of the appeal. I became certain with time not of God or any one religion, but of the simple fact in my chest of having faith, of the simple fact that I loved the way of faith. I loved faith as a winding road, as a tender companion through a difficult and often unfair world.

I think faith comes from our friends and from Creation itself. I think it is wound through life, it showers down on us from the clouds and sprouts in the soil and blooms on branches. I think faith is like an orientation or a posture in light of the many lessons of love. To behold the goodness and generosity of friends, to witness the courage of sacrifice and the humility of prayer, to feel seen and heard, to be recognized as inherently magnificent and dignified by loved ones and by strangers, to be yearned for and cared for from Ashfield to Afghanistan, from Afghanistan to Ashfield, these are among the things love teaches. To be conversed with, to be asked sincere questions by someone wanting sincerely to know more about you, to be precocious and earnest in childhood and to whisper to the world to wish for simple things, are things that love is doing all around us. To cling to a family pet, to hold him tight, to see how you give him life and meaning and he gives it right back to you—*these are the hoof-prints of faith*. They are the weight and substance of love, who is God, impressed on the snow.

God is love, and love is behind and in and through all life. But, love is struggling, it is struggling against hearts that have been hardened and closed off. Love struggles against a great deal in this tough old world. But it struggles in and through each of us at every turn, so the investigation into the existence of the God who is love turns out to be easier than I thought. The cookies and milk and honey and a budding promised land that feeds and serves us all equally is all around us and constantly catching our breath, like the sun rising or its red demise at day's end, it is always a lovely horizon.

In the letter to the Hebrews, this beautiful passage, the author remembers the many fruits of faith in history and in our stories, how they have been cherished and passed on through the ages, how we receive faith from those who had it before us. We receive faith from those who learned the lessons of love in every age, during every mode of production; despite great struggles, they were not dissuaded in the face of personal failings or social ones, they were not dissuaded by violence, or by people who make the world rough and hostile to love's many affections. By others' faith, we inherit our own. We inherit faith from the love-who-is-God or the God-who-is-love as surely as Abraham once did. As the author of Hebrews says, this faith looks ahead to the fulfillment of a great promise; this faith is simply the desire for a better country, a holy city, a homeland of shared abundance that means scarcity for none. By faith this promise is a gift given to the people. We are its stewards today.

My sister never got that Jeep because she never knew to bring my parents into the fold. She wisely gave up on the idea that what we hope for can be kept a secret. But the truth is most children in North America will not get that Jeep not because they hid their hopes from their parents but because the two or three jobs their parents are working will barely cover the bills let alone the cost of a lavish gift. As we get older, and uncover deeper meanings of the holidays and festivals that bind us to loved ones and to our communities, this fact of inequality enters into the unfathomable questions too. Where is God in this iniquity?

Jesus teaches us that it is God's 'good pleasure to give us the kingdom'. God's good pleasure! We know from the gospels that the kingdom is not a place where a few children get everything, more than they could ever want, and the rest get little or none of what they hope most deeply for. We know from the scriptures that the kingdom is a place where there is no longer rich or poor; a place, a holy city still ahead of us, where the promise of love is fulfilled for all God's children, regardless of race or gender or

ability. It is not a magical place like the North Pole; it is a real place within and among us already. God is love, so the kingdom of God is just that place over those hills where the sun rises and sets on a peaceful people, where love by day and by night rules over all things.

So, if someone asks any of us, are we a Christian church? Do we believe in this Jesus who taught such things, in the cross and resurrection? Do we believe in God? The truth I think for *all* of us is we are not so sure of the answer. Some of us might be drawn to those words and those symbols and that particular story of love in history, while others of us might turn to a different one. But as stewards of God's or love's faith in each person, let us say together that we believe no child is better or more deserving than another. And let us say together that every adult is a child in the eyes of love or in the eyes of our Creator. The God-who-is-love never stops believing in each one of us, and that each one of us is equally deserving of things big and small. It is God's will that each of us be fed and housed and educated, not to make ourselves big but to make our people great. The land is rich, God made it so for all of us. Let us be stewards of the faith that proclaims it is not God that gets in the way of equality, it's not God that's doing this to us, that's dividing neighbors, it's not God that underfunds rural public schools, not Creation that has parceled out everything to some children and almost nothing to others, that gives some people and some nations a voice and oppresses others. If that is the God we believe in, God would be ashamed to be our God; God would deny it.

Even in the face of iniquity, of uneven ground, of no justice and no peace, God's love is all around us and between us. By faith may we look ahead to the promise of the city of love, that God has prepared. By the faith we steward, may we see that love is revealed in our own lives, in countless daily acts; let us discover love just the same through Creation itself, in the sun's rays and quenching springs and under the shade of the trees.

Taking God's way, equipped with the hoof-prints of love and faith, which is the assurance of things hoped for, one day we will pinch ourselves and know that we are awake in the place that is promised.

Alleluia and amen