



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

September 26, 2021 “Consider the Lilies” Rev. David Jones

There’s a magazine that I get, thanks to the generosity of a congregant, called *The Christian Century*. It’s ecumenical and it regularly includes perspectives of other faith traditions as well. It’s issued weekly, so often it has topical stories--for example, there was a piece very recently about a Presbyterian border ministry, where Presbyterian churches on either side of the US-Mexico border, separated by a wall, are entering into a coalition to think about the meaning of sanctuary; they think about this with a faith held in common but while standing on opposite sides of this unnatural divide. They think about their work in biblical terms, recalling the story of Moses. They imagine that they stand on the banks of the Nile, “during Israel’s time of captivity in Egypt, and there is a baby there in a rush basket in the reeds at [their] feet.” They remember that Pharaoh’s daughter saved Moses. But they also remember that before she can do that, if you pay close enough attention to the biblical text, it is Moses’ sister and mother who first create sanctuary for the child, by setting the child in “a quiet place among the rushes,” where Pharaoh’s daughter can find him. This shared ministry at the border is guided by the light of this sacred story: the pastor on the US side of the border says, “the child whom we save in our sanctuary will be our liberator, like Moses.”

This is the kind of faith practice that has always moved me in my life, and I know this is true for many of us at our church. But saying to each other what we *should* do or *should* say or *should* be is very different from hearing God’s call for ourselves, of feeling uniquely *invited*. Last week, Holly, our wonderful preacher on a gorgeous morning at the end of summer and at the beginning of fall, said she has been feeling a mounting enthusiasm. And enthusiasm, as she taught us, is a word that comes from the ancient Greek, and it means “to be inspired (or possessed) by God.” Later that day, as I listened to Grant Moss make music on our restored organ--as I looked at the beautiful and diverse color of our newly alive pipes--I found myself enthusiastic. Whether through collaborative ministry that can climb over walls, or the stewardship of a community to preserve and honor our history, or the brilliance of Stein’s paintbrush and the incredible talent of a musician that transcends history and excites us about the future--we are all a part of this very precious and wonderful thing, this enthusiasm. As Rev. Sarah Pirtle likes to say, we are all helping to carry the flame, we are all trying to place ourselves and each other in a safe place among the rushes. That’s the opportunity of belonging to a historic, local church and being part of a national church like the UCC; regardless of one’s particular faith, whether it is ecumenical or inter-faith or wary of the word faith altogether, this is the opportunity that we get to explore here, and that we get to safeguard within these walls on behalf of those who came before us, congregants like Mimi and Al; and that we get to offer as a gift to those who will soon join us, and leave as a bequest to those who will come after us that we may never meet.

I think sometimes we need to be reminded of how great our opportunity is, how life-giving and life-saving it is to belong in one way or another, in one sense or another, to a church community like ours. We can overlook or miss or forget that Life as it lives in us grants us this sacred way, imbues us--young and old--with this holy sight: that whatever is wrong, whatever is unfair or unjust, can be made otherwise. That’s all I ever mean by faith--faith in each other and in the creatures and the trees that we share these hills with. Faith as in the gardens we make and the vegetables we grow and share. Once you have come to believe in

your neighbor, and once you have come to believe a person born into hardship has the same right as anyone to fulfill their innermost hopes--has the same right to fulfill *their enthusiasm*--then life is staggeringly beautiful. It is not suddenly easy, not painless, not without tragedy and heartbreak, but it is endlessly beautiful. It is halting to think about, but once we are convicted of faith in this sense, *everything* we seek to do can become the proof of our faith; every step, further evidence of the goodness living within us. If nothing changes in our lifetimes--or does not change enough--if justice does not roll down, that *we* have chosen this kind of community and known this kind of faith, by our own lives the promise of love and justice and everlasting peace will have been carried a little further. So, we cannot really fail, and we cannot really die, not once we have been inspired by God's presence in one another, not once we have felt God's hope in ours.

There are so many things happening in our world, and there are many threads of mission being discussed at our church that we need to find a way to braid together. There are many things to build and to clarify, and decisions to make about how ambitious to be, how quickly to move, how to come alive as a church community like our organ last Sunday, and like the earth at the fall equinox, how to move from one fulfilling ministry into the next. It can all seem a little overwhelming.

But what does Jesus teach us in Mark today? He does not use the phrase racial justice, he doesn't use the word liberation, he doesn't affix labels to his ministry or to others'. He keeps it very simple, like a poet. In another article in the same issue of *The Christian Century* that I've already mentioned, minister Debie Thomas draws out this comparison. Jesus is a poet, she writes, 'who stands on a hilltop and invites us to "consider the lilies" and "behold the birds,"' 'who offers his followers a balm for anxiety in the profusion of wildflowers and the antics of sparrows, [...] who often slipped away to the wilderness to pray.' Like a poet, Jesus talks simply, of the little one and a cup of cold water.

I was quite struck by how closely Jesus' teaching today recalls Holly's from a week ago. As Debie Thomas puts it: "in the [business] of our contemporary life, [...] Jesus commands us to foreground what we often ignore--to bring the rich resources of our senses and imagination into the realm of faith, because all of God's good earth is sanctuary, and the lilies and birds have something to teach us about peace." Thomas concludes, "this is a resounding call to pay attention,"--which is exactly what Holly said last Sunday, an invitation to discover and share in nature's enthusiasm.

Jesus can be miscast as a stodgy, moralizing priest when we imagine him thundering commands to do this and to do that, to love our neighbors and feed the hungry. But we are hearing the way Jesus sounds after such a long time; like our organ before its restoration, we aren't hearing his voice in the way it was meant to be heard. We need to restore Jesus the poet, "the man who woke up before sunrise to climb mountains; who cherished seashores, gardens, deserts, and 'secluded places,'" the man who described himself as a child of God--God's Son--who placed himself in the quiet place in the rushes to see where a people's liberation must begin. The artist Makoto Fujimura says this is why we are all here, in communities like our church, to "invite the abundance of God's world into the reality of scarcity all around us" in our towns and cities.

In Mark today, Jesus beholds the same beauty of the lilies and birds in the faces of those he calls "the little ones;" and beholds divine abundance in the cup of cold water. To be clear, for Jesus the little ones are not only children, they are all the people who are innocent, who do not hold power in our unjust world. The little ones are the individual employee, powerless in an unsafe warehouse. The little ones are the many of us living paycheck to paycheck without a spare moment to think about how things could be different as we rush from one job to the next, who must choose between their bills and having enough food. The little ones are teens attending a public school that is underfunded and understaffed. The little ones will be those in a crisis who can no longer get the treatment they need in their own community at a place like East Spoke in Greenfield because powerful people who do not reside here, who do not care for this place the way we do, have seen fit to close it. The little ones are the seniors in a rural place who cannot get the transportation they need, or seniors whose medication costs have increased suddenly, whose fixed incomes do not keep up with inflation and so can't afford a new appliance after an old one has failed. The little ones are those who are denied their dignity because of the color of their skin or the direction of their

love or the crest or colors of their flag. Jesus' affection for God's beautiful creation all around us is rivaled only by his affection for those who suffer because their share in its beauty has been denied. And so a person of faith and goodwill, regardless of the religion they claim or the qualifications they hold, who offers a cup of cold water--wherever God's enthusiasm is under attack in nature or in a human body--*that* person will know peace, that person will reside in the kin-dom of God on earth as in heaven. That's why we are here.

Jesus the poet reminds us, like Stein's paintbrush, like the congregant who points out monarchs, that we must pay attention to the beauty and abundance all around us, so that we can behold it on each other's faces and in each other's hearts. As Debie Thomas concludes, "it's only when we know how to apprehend and honor the beautiful that we'll respond appropriately when the beautiful is mistreated. We won't protect what we don't love or respect what we don't notice. So consider the lilies. Behold the birds." And do not hesitate to offer a cup of cold water to each other and to those who are little in our world today. Do not forget or overlook--anymore than the lilies--all the times when you have done this for others, or when others have done it for you. If we consider and then do these simple things--and do them together--our shared, poetic faith will continue to *be* sanctuary, until our liberation and the earth's has come.

Alleluia and amen.