



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

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, September 4, 2022 “Labor Day & the Rest We Deserve”

Rev. David Jones

This is Labor Day weekend, and there is nothing more important on Labor Day weekend than getting some rest. We all deserve rest from our labors, whatever they may be.

Maybe they are the physical labors of a family and a household, feeding your loved ones, maintaining a home, tending the gardens. Maybe your labors are emotional labors, sitting with someone or reaching out to someone to let them know you are there and ready to listen. Maybe your labors are spiritual, drawing you nearer to your grief or someone else’s; maybe your labor looks like consolation and comfort. Maybe your labors are the tasks of keeping our church a place of refuge, a place of singing, a place of hope, across this difficult time we have been living through. Maybe yours are the labors of self-care, of prioritizing your own health and wellbeing.

And then there are the other labors we overlook, labors like dealing with financial distress and unemployment—real and widespread labors of struggle that are endemic to every community in our society, yet are rarely spoken of. We silently expect that people will bear these labors on their own. But God speaks of them often in our scriptures, using the prophets like Jeremiah and the people themselves to cry out for economic justice. Because God is love. God does not think some labor is better or more valuable than other labor. In God’s eyes, all labor that uplifts humanity is dignified and important. So, according to our scriptures, we *all* deserve a rest this weekend.

Naturally this word “labor” is taking on a different meaning for me these days. And I’m finding that different parts of scripture are leaping out to me for the first time. We often think of scripture as this thing that is telling us how to behave or telling us what to believe. But really scripture is showing us the things our ancestors felt were important to hold onto (whether good things or bad).

Anyway, suddenly I am strongly drawn to a Psalm like this one we read today, particularly to the image of God shaping us in our mother’s womb. It makes me wonder about how Caity and I should fulfill our roles right now. What music should Caity and I play for this new person to hear while they grow; what tone of our voices comforts them? What of us do we hope this new person will receive? What of us would we like to spare them? What will they look like, what will they be interested in, who will they become? The Psalmist’s description that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” seems just right to me for the process of pregnancy. Lots of new worries and new wonders at the same time.

Our understanding of this new experience we are having will reflect what our families and friends have been through, what lessons or joys or regrets they impart. And this is magnified by belonging to a church community. Being part of a church connects us to so many people and experiences we might not otherwise know. The truth is, nothing is guaranteed, and we don’t know what these next two months will bring, and of course we know even less about the days beyond. There is a part of me that has tried to remain cautious, trying to protect myself from all that we cannot know. But being part of a community has made me stronger than that. I’ve been able to admit how excited I am, how eager I am for the due date of November 8th to arrive. At some point you realize how important it is to be open about such feelings. Our community needs to know what we each cherish and what we each look forward to, so that they can be there for us whatever may come.

Each of us will choose to share a certain amount of ourselves, the appropriate amount for who we each are. But to put ourselves out there at all, aloud or silently, in joy or in concern, invites others to be a part of our lives. It is scary, because it means we are accountable to what we really feel; we won't be able to deny our feelings to others, which means we won't be able to deny what we feel to ourselves. But this vulnerability makes us strong, because it means we won't be facing life on our own. We will share our happiness or our grief, but we will also receive the happiness and grief of others.

This communion between us makes us more like God; we become vaster and more encompassing, present in more and more of Creation. That unseen string that Nancy has spoken of, that links us to one another wherever we each go, links us eventually to so many people that came before us and after us that finally we become like the characters we find in scripture. I like the scriptures not because they have answers to life's mysteries, not because they have commandments that will protect us from hardship, not because they give us the beliefs and behaviors that will make us prosperous, but because they show us how dignified we all are by being born at all, how big and important our human experience is. This unflinching belief in our passages today, that we are formed and reformed by the hands of God, that God will always be with us whatever comes, is the simple good news that our labor on this earth is worthwhile. That if we labor together, we will be strong enough for what comes.

And if we remember who we are—clay in the hands of a potter, children growing in our mother's womb, each searched for and known by God in all our intricacy and wonder, we will also take greater care that no one is left to labor on their own. Because until all of us are a part of the same, inclusive economy—until all of us are paid fairly for a fair day's work, until all of us enjoy dignified and important work and holidays that are restful—God will keep working on us. God will keep reforming us and weaving us, knitting us together, and making us for the days of justice and peace that have not as yet existed.

So no matter who you are, and wherever you are on life's journey, take the rest you deserve this weekend.

Alleluia and amen.