



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

THE ORDINATION OF DAVID JONES

Sermon of Rev. Mick Comstock

I. “By What Authority?”

Being a Pastor in the Congregational Tradition in the United Church of Christ.

The ordination and installation of a new pastor, provides the occasion for us all to be re-introduced to our own traditions. “What does it mean to be a pastor? What does it mean to be a congregation?”

Listen really carefully to this story, because if you don’t, you’ll think it’s the same story you just heard.

But this one happened a generation later.

God said to Moses:

Numbers 20:8 **Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock. ⁹So Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he had commanded him. ¹⁰Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” ¹¹Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. ¹²But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” ¹³These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and by which he showed his holiness.**

One time, I read these two stories of Moses getting water for the people of Israel to the kids in church. I asked them, as I asked you, to listen very closely and then asked them why Moses couldn’t go into the promised land after that. (Before going on, say to yourself what you think the answer is.) A little six-year-old girl waved her hand with excitement and piped up, “He didn’t listen!” I looked up at her smiling and nodding dad, who mouthed in wonder, “She listened!” Did you?

Instead of commanding the rock to yield its water, Moses struck it with his magic staff.

He didn't listen!

You might be wondering what this has to do with becoming a pastor in the Congregational tradition.

The answer is, "everything!"

The only staff we pastors have with which to strike the rock for water is words. For some of us who are really good with words, the staff, at first seems magical. We're ready to think, as Moses wasn't, that we can bring forth God's water with words.

For us, words are our greatest temptation, as the magic staff was Moses's. One temptation is to use our words for self-aggrandizement, for the seduction of churches and people, because people and churches are so hungry for good words.

When we are ordained, and each time we're installed into a new ministry, we hear that we're "called to be Pastor and Teacher. Always, something in us cries out, "but what about Preacher?" because that's what we really want to be. One who speaks with authority and gets listened to..

In today's Gospel, we would-be preachers stand side by side with the chief-priests and elders, asking Jesus by what authority he speaks. If we really listen, we'll realize that it's our own authority that they and we are really worried about. So, instead of answering, he tells them and us a parable of repentance, where it is the tax collectors and the prostitutes who have heard him and first said, "no", with their lives, and then listened again and said "yes" with their lives, who will speak with authority.

We hoped our gifted preaching would confer authority on us but instead we find ourselves called to repent of that hope before we can speak with the kind of authority Jesus means.

Our other, even greater, temptation is to confuse our words with God's Word. In our Reformed Tradition, it is understood that there is a difference between the Word of God and the words of the Bible.

We speak of "the Living Word" as in John I ..."In the beginning was the Word...John Calvin saw the Word enlivened in us by the Holy Spirit who has two jobs, (he called them "offices"): to inspire the writers of Scripture, and to inspire us, the readers. Inspiration is a very lively contemporary event.

So, what is the temptation we must repent of if the Word of God is to be heard speaking in our words? It's like the little girl said: our temptation, like Moses's, is to fail to listen for the Word of God. To think we know already what God's going to say.

Maybe the church used to be "a bully pulpit", as we pastors first hoped when we got ourselves into it, but, if we're listening, we discover that now a congregation is really a **bully listening-post**, positioned at the junction of our common life story with the stories of God's people in the Bible.

We reluctantly discover that our primary calling is not to preach with authority but first of all to listen. . . listen to our congregations, and to listen with them to the conversations of the world around us, and to listen together to the Bible stories as they suddenly enlighten and are enlightened by our stories.

Our calling as Teacher comes from the fact that we've been privileged to study our history and traditions, so we can bring that knowledge into the conversations of the congregation, but it confers no authority on us. In the Congregational tradition, authority arises only out of the conversations of the congregations.

II The Pastor as Church Member

The Pastor is neither an Employee nor the Manager of the Congregation.

One of the ways that the United Church of Christ has remained congregational is that our ordained ministers are required to be members of the congregations they serve. If we pastors were Presbyterian, we would be members of the Presbytery, if we were Episcopal, it would be the Diocese, and so on throughout the denominational world. But in the UCC, we are members of the congregation, called, as are other members, to certain of the congregation's ministries: in our case to be "Pastor and Teacher".

Everybody knows this much, but it feels to me that the implications of this fact for the life of ordained ministers and congregations alike are slipping away from our consciousness. I have had difficulty finding what I am about to say in writing anywhere, which may be an indication of our precarious hold on it. I would be grateful if anyone could direct me to some sources.

I, myself, have it by oral tradition, having been fortunate enough to have had as mentor one of the last remaining grand old congregational ministers in the Franklin Association. It was Henry M. Bartlett. If he were still living he would be one hundred and twenty years old this June.

It was 1971 and I was in my first scrape with one of the two congregations I served then. It was about accountability. They were asking me to account in detail for my time. When I told Hank what was going on he said, "They're treating you like their employee, you can't let 'em get away with that! If you don't stop them right now your ministry will be impossible there!" He wasn't implying that ministers shouldn't be accountable. This was about how accountability should be understood.

I said, "But I *am* their employee, aren't I? They *pay* me for what I do, don't they?" He said, "No!" on both counts, "And if you don't figure that out and help them figure that out, your ministry will be impossible there". He was right, my ministry was impossible there for almost five years.

I only lasted that long because I had another church at the same time. It's probably important that the first church was made up of transplanted suburbanites like myself, and that the one where ministry was not impossible was made up of farmers and the offspring of farmers, what remained of the kind of rural agricultural community in which Congregationalism had evolved and thrived. The congregation of suburbanites was just hard work, a thankless job, and the problem of accountability was never solved. The

rural congregation was a guilty pleasure and a mystery, and the question of accountability never came up, at least in those terms. I think it was because the farmers experienced time, work, the church, community, the relationship of pastor and congregation, and, therefore, accountability in a fundamentally different way.

I have, as Hank ordered, been trying to figure this out ever since. *If I'm not their employee, who am I? If they don't pay me for what I do, what's this little paycheck about every two weeks?* You can see that, along with the problems of the nature of accountability and of compensation, there's also a question of identity here. Together, these dilemmas have plagued us ordained ministers and our congregations for nearly three generations now.

I want to pursue this question of identity for a bit because all of this came to a head again for me recently when I read somewhere that we ordained ministers were, and I quote, "CEOs of small businesses". Well, I laughed until I cried when I read that one. I kept thinking about what it would be like to be the CEO of a small business where you couldn't fire anyone, where you're the only one who could be fired, where you and the secretary were the only ones who could be held accountable, where everybody else in the organization considered themselves to be your boss. If people, including us ministers, are seriously thinking about our place in the church in such terms, it's small wonder we spend so much time feeling so precariously perched there. This is why the notion of being an employee makes pastoral ministry impossible.

It's not surprising, then, that we pastors have for the most part tried to take refuge among the "helping professions". We probably fit best among the teachers and social workers as helping professionals. But they are employees of their institutions, which brings us back to the problem we began with, which they try to solve with unions. If we think of ourselves as among the doctors, the lawyers, and especially the shrinks, which feels kind of good until we compare incomes, then the full scope of our dilemma finally emerges.

The problem is that if we consider ourselves professionals, then that makes our fellow church members amateurs, or pupils, or clients, or patients, depending on the profession we choose to liken ourselves to. Sadly, when we pastors talk together about our parishioners, we often speak of them as if they were always in one or another of these needy roles. What this makes clear is that this question of pastoral identity is also a problem of the identity of the rest of the congregation.

The puzzle of how the pastor is related in the congregation is inextricably intertwined with the question of how the other members are related in the congregation. Are there ways to think and speak of each other that don't end up diminishing one or the other of us?

Now that we have a better sense of the parameters of the problem, I want to return to a consideration of the contrast between my suburban church, (which, by the way was the smaller of the two), and my rural church in order to try to gain some deeper insight. I want particularly to contrast the terminology each used instinctively to speak of the relationship of pastor and church members in the congregation. For the suburbanites

the language set included “hiring and firing” the pastor, entering into a “contract”, paying him or her a “salary”, and raising questions of “professional accountability”. We pastors tend to use this language just as instinctively about ourselves and our “jobs.”

The oldest generation of the rural church still used the language of “calling and dismissing”, “covenanting”, and “providing a living”. And they still understood ministry like they understood their own work, as a “vocation” that required “faithfulness”. These are not just quaint ways of saying the same thing that we and the other suburbanites are saying when we say “salary” or “accountability. They evoke a different reality in which *everyone* understood themselves to be called and dismissed, whether into and from the community or into and from life itself. Everyone was entwined in spoken and unspoken covenants, including the church’s covenant. And everyone was involved in “making a living”.

For the younger generations in both congregations, of course, the quotation marks were already in place, because they were living the same reality as the suburbanites. But their elders had lived the life of which this language made the deepest sense, and they still, forty-five years ago, called the tune. Now they are all dead, and we are all employers and employees.

For that generation now gone, working was only partly to make money, but entirely to make a living, or maybe better to make a *life*. For us, the two have come to mean the same thing, and that’s why parishioners and pastors alike have a hard time understanding the meaning of the money that passes between them. And for them there was no great chasm between the vocation of the pastor and the vocations of the parishioners.

This is not to say there was no difference, however, for up to about three generations ago, Congregationalists worked hard and self-consciously to have it understood that *they were not paying the parson for work done, but that they were providing a living so that a work that was as vital to the community as growing food or making hats or factoring hay rakes could get done.*

This may seem to us like a distinction without a difference, but the fact is that the whole fragile network of relationships that under-girded not only the congregation, but also the community, hung on this question, because *no one* was paid for what they did in church, just as they were not paid for the other acts of neighborliness that make the difference between a community and a housing development.

Churches are like canaries in a coal mine, and this question about whether there are ways for pastors and parishioners “to think and speak of each other that don’t end up diminishing one or the other of us” points to a broader question about the possibilities of the survival of neighborliness in a world that is, outside the immediate family, characterized more and more by relationships that are utilitarian, coercive, and calculable.

Our hope is that our churches and the memories we bear may also be like seedbeds for the recovery of the genuine communities we have lost. For that to happen, we will have transform our nostalgia for “community” into a critical understanding of what being communities require of us, and offers to us.