

GREENFIELD RECORDER

Faith Matters: ‘Only A Confession’

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(Each Saturday, a faith leader offers a personal perspective in this space. To become part of this series, email religion@recorder.com)

Like so many people right now, I have trouble thinking about anything besides the still unfolding situation in Ukraine. I am writing in the afternoon of March 18; a peace deal has not yet been reached and hopes for such a deal have been repeatedly dashed. Civilian casualties are mounting; the threat of escalation is increasing. Sanctions, or economic warfare, appear likely to split the world into two blocs for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, over 30 years ago.

Previously in this space, the Rev. James Koyama has written movingly about how this unfolding crisis tempts us even into a desire for vengeance. Rev. Koyama searched his own heart, asking “how can I respond to the inhumanity around me without losing my own humanity?” Of course, he is inviting us to join him in posing this question. It is a question born of confession.



• The Rev. David Jones of the First Congregational Church of Ashfield. STAFF PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ

As I searched myself with Rev. Koyama's question as my guide, the first thing I discovered within me was resentment. I resent how my country of Canada raised me to think so little, so lightly of war. Recently our church in Ashfield has partnered with St. John's Episcopal Church and members of the community to prepare the way for an Afghan family displaced by the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the return of the Taliban to power after 20 years of war. I recall as a 13-year-old, reeling from 9/11, that I "supported" this war, to the extent a child can. I did not imagine fighting in it. I did not imagine it would become a 20-year occupation. I did not imagine it would end the way it did. I had no sense of responsibility to the Afghan people, and I knew nothing of their history. I resent how I was made complicit in my country's own lack of imagination and easy resort to violence.

The second thing I found was anger. I don't mean anger toward Russia, though that is there, too. I found anger toward our national news media, who have so quickly forgotten that the largest humanitarian crisis in the world is in Afghanistan (or in Yemen), not in Ukraine. Of course, I can understand and accept how this new crisis belongs on the front page — that Ukraine also suddenly faces a humanitarian crisis of the highest order, worsening every day. But I have a harder time understanding why the crisis in Afghanistan receded from view long before Feb. 24, when Russia invaded its neighbor. I have a harder time understanding why cruise missiles used against Europeans are somehow more disturbing than cruise missiles used against anyone else. I am angry how this difference in attention will inevitably become a difference in support, and that once again some people will benefit from the great compassion of our people, while others will not.

Finally, I have found an overwhelming sense of grief — first, for the immediate tragedy, "from the Ukrainian families that are being torn apart, all the way to those dying Russian soldiers who had to betray their own hearts to invade," as Rev. Koyama wrote. But then another grief presents, a grief like when you are shaken out of a dream. For 30 years, children of the West like me could think so little of war because America stood as the world's superpower. Globalization unfurled at a breathtaking pace. At some point in my life, I thought this was as it should be, that it might be called progress, that people of the world — notwithstanding those sites of conflict on the frontiers of the West — were drawing nearer to one another, and a crisis like climate change actually could be surmounted through international cooperation.

"How can I respond to the inhumanity around me without losing my own humanity?" Now I can confess that I did lose my humanity; or, I pray that I did, to have never thought about how a war on their homeland would impact my 13-year-old siblings in Afghanistan. I pray that I did, to have thought so little of young men and women in Canada or in the U.S. who would go off to fight and die there, young people who were disproportionately from the working class and communities of color in our own unequal society. From Yugoslavia to Ukraine, my own 30 years of peace were only a dream.

If this were a sermon, I would follow the scripture to whatever hope I could grab onto. Maybe even the big hope of the good news, of the inevitable coming of a new realm of peace and justice on earth as in heaven, where war is no longer, where there is no misery, no poverty, no inequality or lost souls, only the endless grace of siblinghood, only the gentleness of shared and

fulfilling work, only a table of abundance for all nations, where everyone has a seat and everyone drinks from an overflowing cup. But this is not a sermon. It is only a confession.

About the church

The Rev. David Jones is the minister at the First Congregational Church (UCC), an Open and Affirming congregation that has served as a center for prayer in Ashfield for over 265 years. Today's congregation reflects the region's diversity, is community-oriented, is in love with contemporary and traditional music, is engaged in missions that address the climate crisis, racism, and food insecurity, housing the Hilltown Churches Food Pantry in its Friendship Hall. The church was recently awarded a \$50,000 grant to build relationships and tell the stories of common struggle and hope across Western Mass, and will celebrate a newly restored organ with a concert series this fall. First Congregational Church is currently worshipping in person with proper COVID-19 precautions and online via Zoom. Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome to join us. Phone: 413-628-4470; website: www.ashfielducc.org



• First Congregational Church of Ashfield. Staff file photo/PAUL FRANZ