

“Powerful, Yet Humble”
(Luke 17:5-10; 2 Timothy 1:1-7)

10/2/22
Rev. J. Koyama

I’d like to preach this morning in a way that might seem prideful at first, as though I am conducting a meeting of the “mutual back-patting society.” But I hope it will turn out to be more an affirmation of what a church can be and an expression of gratitude for what it has been for me. I know that some of you are as allergic to the limelight as you are hard-working, so I warn you now that I’m going to “toot a few horns”.

Last Sunday afternoon, I went to the installation for Rev. David Jones in Ashfield. I took a seats next to two members of the Ashfield church, who probably saw me as a potential member and were eager to make a good impression. They started telling me about how wonderful their church was; that they have as many as 40 worshippers on a Sunday.

When the choir sang, they sighed with satisfaction. And when a quirky elderly deacon, got up to speak, talked a bit too long and said a couple of awkward things, they laughed good-naturedly along with the rest. It showed that their church has “personality”. The offering time was botched much worse than we ever have, so I felt a bit of redemption there. By the way, Rev. Comstock preached one of his history lesson sermons and did a great job.

I have to say that I enjoyed the entire service, in part because it reminded me of us. But I also felt a tiny bit competitive. So whenever my pew mates oohed and aaaahed, I thought to myself, “well we do this almost as well”, or “hm,hm,hm, we hands down do a better job of that!”

I know it is kind of small minded to feel that way. But two years in, I can't help being proud of us. I know we're not perfect, and confess that I often walk around with rose colored glasses. I see the glass as more than half full, not half empty, in part because there is never a week that goes by where I'm not uplifted by something I see.

I like visiting different congregations, because each one has its own feel. I think that Ashfield is a good church. I actually thought about applying there, before applying here. But something was holding me back. I personally agree with a lot of their progressive views, but it felt too much like “progressive central” to me, maybe because it is in the orbit of Northampton.

I know that a church that is unequivocally progressive can make a big impact. It has a kind of strength, that we don't have. But for whatever reason, I've never ministered in a church like that and it's not a good fit for me.

Who I am

My ministry has always been in churches that are more of a cross section of the views that are out there, because those are the churches I feel drawn to; where the people who are in covenant with each other don't necessarily agree on all the issues. And it may be hard in a church like that to take sides publically on some important issues. But the decision to be faithful to the covenant we share, in spite of our differences is, I think, its own powerful witness to the Gospel; that loving well is more important than being right.

It's kind of the way I see this congregation. In spite of the fact that there are differences that can create uneasy tensions. It's what I'm used to and It's more interesting to me. I feel as deeply drawn to people who are conservative as I do to people who are progressive. I know that Rev. Comstock felt the same way. And I feel that my life would be impoverished if I were to serve a congregation where we all agreed with each other about everything.

I don't need or want that kind of safety. I prefer the uncertainty of not knowing what someone else thinks, because it means God has something to say to me in that relationship. And I love the experience of falling in love with people I don't quite understand and wanting to know why. Isn't that really what we have all been doing all our lives, even with the people who are closest to us, (loving people we don't understand?).

Our Congregation

In any case, the larger point is that I am influencing who you are, and you are influencing each other and who I am, and this gives our congregation a personality and through the Holy Spirit, a distinctly unique spiritual power, that we each carry with us when we walk out the door and into the world.

So let me describe one of the strengths in this congregation that was on display, the very same day as the installation, in our own church.

I don't know how you experienced Jean Darling's presentation on the Community Meals, during last Sunday's Social hour. But I was awestruck.

Maybe because of the way I grew up, I never learned how to cook. I'm not sure I can even boil water without messing it up. So when Jean described how she is able to obtain and prepare a meal for as many as 170 people, and to do it on her own stove, my jaw was on the floor.

That is a "miraculous" power that she has, to meet the most basic needs of so many people on a monthly basis. And part of the reason I say "miraculous" is because I can't imagine doing it myself. I would be like Mickey Mouse in Fantasia, unleashing a disaster.

And Jean has been doing all this, while at the same time being present with her larger family through some very devastating events. And what also makes me proud to be associated with this church and with her, is the humility with which she does what she does.

In my eyes, Jean is a great example of someone who does what I think of as impossible. She is like one of whom Jesus speaks, in today's Gospel, when he says: "Say to the mulberry tree be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it will happen."

It is a reading that combines two very powerful things. The faith to be able to perform miracles and the humbleness of the slave, who only

does what the circumstances of his life has given him to do, without any expectation of special recognition.

I'm sure that I am embarrassing Jean by singling her out, but she is a prime example of something I see over and over again in this congregation, people who roll up their sleeves and work like the Dickens, but then assume a humble posture, as though they had done nothing remarkable. It is a faithfulness that mirrors the message of this morning's Gospel reading (great power is coupled with humility).

I have only to say the names of congregation members and wondrous miracles leap to mind. How does Ann Cenzano make her fingers wiggle in a way that makes beautiful music come out of that black box she sits beside? It's impossible for me to imagine it. I can't even play the triangle, without messing it up. And yet she effortlessly embellishes our worship with a musical pathway by which the Holy Spirit can enter into our hearts.

This kind of miracle is replicated throughout the church in as many ways as there are members. Number crunching, event organizing, singing in harmony, doing crafts, diagnosing the health of the building and finding solutions, lifting and carrying, being good listeners or wise counselors, each is engaged in contributing what might as well be

magic to some other portion of the congregation. And together we are something more than the sum of our parts, we are our own unique version of the Body of Christ.

So that one of the pleasures I look forward to this fall is being a witness to what all the various members of the congregation are up to as, we all pitch in to enrich the common life. I know that when I see you doing good things, you rub off on me, and your influence makes me a better and a more motivated person.

This is precisely what Paul is talking about when he greets Timothy in our second reading. He says to Timothy,

How I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

This passage is a beautiful expression of the spiritual power that comes from witnessing to the loving and disciplined example of others, and how it makes us better people.

When Paul greets Timothy he is reminded not only of Timothy himself, but of Timothy's grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, who live on in him. And when Paul speaks of the "laying on of hands", he is expressing the conviction that the spirit of power and of love and self-discipline through which miracles happen is not a gift that God gives us in isolation. It is a power that comes to us through our associating with others, through the imprint that their good deeds make on our lives.

When I walked into Ashfield, I wasn't entering as the same James Koyama who would have walked in two years ago. I walked in as somebody who is who he is in part because you do what you do. And I carried with me a Spiritual power that is what it is, in part because you are who you are, just as Timothy was who he was because his mother Lois and his grandmother were who they were and did what they did.

I carried in my heart the friendly smile of Jeanette Emond, the positive reinforcement of Sue Smith, the good advising of Dotty Zellmann, the good will of the guy who calls me "Turbo," the comfort of Bernie's strong tenor voice; the passion of Bercia, the patriotism and humor of Sterling Clark, all as a source of inspiration and a motivating force.

The power that I carried within me to do good in this world, was not my power. It was God's power and to the extent I have it, it exists because it rubs off on me from being with you, and from the people in past

congregations with whom I have rubbed shoulders and from all the loved ones that have left an imprint on my life. And I think that is true for each one of us.

And so I would like to end by jumping the gun on the quilt show next Saturday by telling you about the quilt that you see on the altar. It was given to me as a parting gift from the Lihue Christian Church, the first Congregation I served on the island of Kauai, in Hawaii. And it was made by a past Moderator of the church, a woman who owned the local quilting store, named Julie Yukimura.

Julie was one of the kindest, and most humble people I have ever known. She was a faithful servant of Jesus and about as close as I can imagine a person can come to having a pure heart. She made a huge impact on my life.

The year after I left, she slipped in the bathroom, bumped her head on the way down and was killed instantly. She was 59 years old. It was a devastating blow to the congregation, especially to her elderly mother. She was single and had no children. But her Spirit lives on as an inspiration in that congregation and I too am inspired, whenever I see this quilt. It has a sacred quality for me because the memory of her

goodness reminds me of her Spirit and connects my heart with God and with you. And so, I think it is fitting that her work adorns the altar this morning.

What a wonderful thing it is in this often lonely world, to know that our that who we truly are has more to do with the “we” than it has to do with the “I.”