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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
Texts: Ecclesiastes 1: 1-15; John 8: 1-12  
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**PUBLIC ART:**  
**WHAT DID JESUS DRAW IN THE SAND?**

One of the most dramatic stories in the bible is the story about how Jesus stood between a woman “caught in the act of adultery” and a self-righteous crowd that was ready to stone her to death. I’m sure the crowd was able to quote chapter and verse, saying over and over again, “It is written. It is written!”

No doubt part of the crowd’s agenda was to test Jesus to see whether he would uphold the law, for it was indeed written that she should be executed for her sin.

Of course, one of the subplots of this story is the man, the woman’s partner in sin. He’s nowhere to be seen. Sadly, so it is in a patriarchal, sexist system, and so, you can imagine how terribly frightened the woman must have felt.

Only Jesus, standing in the middle, is standing between her and certain death.

I’m fascinated by how Jesus handled what must have been a very tense situation. A fragile, vulnerable woman on one side and an angry self-righteous mob on the other, and there is Jesus standing in the middle. That should be suggestive for all of us. Our place is not on the sidelines or up with the spectators, but right in the thick of things, wherever there is conflict, wherever someone is vulnerable, wherever our collective humanity is at stake.

How does one defuse such a volatile situation? How can Jesus get the crowd to take a step back from their anger? How can he get them to maybe rethink their rigidity and allow the opportunity for God’s grace to be operative? What can he do or say to allow the woman the opportunity for a new beginning? What can he do to dissipate the crowd’s hostility and maybe rediscover their humanity?

For Jesus, that’s what it was always about, trying to help people to see and to find and to realize their deeper humanity.

The preacher in me sometimes has too much confidence in words, thinking that if I could just offer the right words in just the right way, conflict, and bloodshed could be avoided.

I love how Jesus exercises a different option. Instead of engaging in argument and polemics, he bends down, and he writes or he draws something in the dust. Now, I wonder. I wonder, could this have been the very beginning of Christianity’s great artistic tradition! Stained glass windows, statuary, icons, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, maybe these all found their genesis in whatever Jesus drew in the sand.

I'm reminded of when we played sandlot football as children. We would huddle together, and the quarterback would sketch something in the dust. You split wide to the right, and you line up on the left and run straight for the imaginary post. Needless to say, except for Tom Brady and Drew Brees, it rarely – if ever – worked out as planned, but those lines, that picture in the sand gave us a chance **to see, to visualize** what we needed to do.

I'm also reminded of how the Navaho use Sandpainting in their spiritual practices. Beautiful, colorful, intricate paintings that teach God's wisdom are created, and then at the end of the day, those paintings are destroyed.

So it is with whatever Jesus wrote or drew or painted in the sand. The Holy Land is very sandy, and the wind can be fierce, so the work of Jesus' finger didn't last for very long, but my oh my, whatever it was, it was effective.

For 2000 years, scholars have argued about what Jesus might have drawn, but there's no agreement, and so for better or worse, it's left to our own imagination.

So, it is with art. It quickens our imagination. It's rarely as didactic as we might wish. Art, good art rarely says, "It is written. It is written". It's more suggestive than that. It has a way of working in and around our defenses, enabling us to see things from a different perspective, saying things that are perhaps too deep for words.

I think of this beautiful Meetinghouse, an exquisite work of art in and of itself, indeed probably the most famous work of art in our community, much beloved by artists such as Childe Hassam and Charles Ebert. I'm sure the pandemic has made us appreciate the beauty of this place even more. And yet, even throughout the pandemic, the architecture of this place has provided quiet, silent wisdom to the people of this community.

The vertical lines, the sheer height of this Meetinghouse has reminded us of the verticality of God's universe, that there is always an "up" when we're feeling down. The vertical lines of our spire and ionic columns remind us of our capacity for dignity, our capacity to stand up a little taller, our capacity to rise above or transcend whatever our situation might be.

Such is the power of art

And I, for one, do not draw a sharp distinction between "Sacred Art" and "Secular Art".

I think of the time when the beautiful city of Sarajevo was being destroyed by war. A city once the center of the winter Olympics had become a place of xenophobic madness and genocide.

I travelled with a Bosnian friend on his first trip back to Srebrenica, the place where his family was massacred, and he was held in a concentration camp. Even as we talked about how painful it was to go back, we also talked about how meaningful it was to remember a cellist who sat the middle of the bombed-out rubble and by his music, Albinoni's *Adagio in G Minor*, helped us all to offer our lamentations and prayers for our broken humanity. Such is the power of art, call it sacred or secular. It reminds us of our true humanity.

I think of a scene from Gunter Grass's strange novel, **The Tin Drum**. As proud, arrogant Nazi youth march across a field, off to the side, Oskar, with his tin drum offers a different beat.... and with that, their perfectly timed goose step is thrown into chaos. Such is the power of art; it causes us to follow the beat of a different drummer. Call it sacred or call it secular.

In one his poems, Rainer Maria Rilke, after describing a sculpture, suddenly ends quite abruptly, saying, **"You must change your life."**<sup>1</sup>

Such is the power that art can have on our lives. Not always, maybe not even often, but every now and then poetry, paintings, music, performance art, murals, sculptures, and theater can stop us in our tracks, force us to question our humanity or maybe our inhumanity and make that moral imperative: **"You must change your life."**

Such is what must have happened as a result of whatever it was that Jesus drew or wrote in the sand. They must have seen something there that led them to say, **"You must change your life" for one by one** the angry crowd went away.

I ask you to think about times in which some form of art had such an impact on your life, and you came away from that experience, saying, **"You must change your life."**

I remember the first time I visited the Statue of Liberty as a child. I'm sure you do as well.

Give me your tired, your poor,  
your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Maybe you saw those words as a child, and you thought about the long journey that brought your ancestors to this country, by choice or by force, as the case may be. Or maybe you saw those words more recently, and you said to yourself, "In many ways we've failed the Statue of Liberty and her message of hospitality, and so now I've got to be the "lady of the harbor." My arms are tired, but I've got to lift up that torch to make my home, my town, my church, my mosque, my synagogue a more welcoming community."

I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Such is the power and persuasion of Public Art, sacred or secular. It drives us into responsible action.

As an outgrowth of our weekly marches for racial justice, initiated by my friend, Maryam Elahi, of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, some of us have started this new initiative called, **"Public Art for Racial Justice Education."**

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<sup>1</sup> Archaic Torso of Apollo

As we as a nation struggle to overcome racism in all its particularity – inadequate affordable housing in our suburban communities, inequities in our health care system brought into stark relief by the pandemic, school curricula that needs to be reviewed to see if we're teaching the truth about slavery, Jim Crow and racial injustice -- we felt the time was right to create new works of art, artistic reminders of our painful past but also and even more to lift up racial justice champions who could serve as a North Star, a North Star by which we can navigate our way toward a new and better future for our children.

Out in front of our elementary school, how I would love to see a sculpture depicting one of my favorite heroes in the struggle for human rights – a 6-year-old girl by the name of Ruby Bridges.

In my imagination, I see families walking past that statue and I hear children asking their parents, “who is Ruby Bridges?” Well, let me tell you, they say, as they sit down on a bench next to the statue.

Ruby was a 6-year-old child escorted to school by federal marshals in 1960. She would be the only Black child in an all-White School, and she walked with remarkable dignity past angry people who spat upon her and shouted racial epithets.

No parents would allow their White children to be in Ruby's class, but Barbara Henry, God bless her, a White teacher from Boston, lovingly taught Ruby for the entire year, even though she was the only student in the classroom.

We need such stories, and at this time when there's so much anger and division, we all need positive ways to channel our energy, inspired by Ruby Bridges and Barbara Henry.

However, artistic license being what it is, I wouldn't leave Ruby Bridges standing all by herself. She needs a friend. Standing next to her would be a skinny 21-year-old Black woman, a recent graduate of Harvard, dressed in yellow, who with every pore in her body, offered a poem of hope for our country. At a time when we needed it the most, when the fabric of our nation was being rendered asunder.

Somehow we've weathered and witnessed  
a nation that isn't broken  
but simply unfinished...

With every breath from my bronze-pounded chest,  
we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one...

For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it  
If only we're brave enough to be it

I would have those words inscribed on New England granite, and I would have Amanda Gorman and Ruby Bridges holding hands on their way to school. But artistic license being what it is, I would add another friend, a 3-year-old by the name of Jane.

This last winter, Steve offered an extraordinary series of sermons, entitled “**Wheels of Justice: Stories from the Deep North.**” It was in one of those sermons that we learned about how a 3-year-old by the name of Jane was sold into slavery on Lyme Street with a bill of sale that will send shivers down your spine – “to be kept and enjoyed” by her new owner.

Sadly, we don’t know much about Jane, but through the gift of artistic imagination, we can reanimate that 3-year-old child. Posthumously, we can crown her the dignity she so much deserves, and we can offer a hand of friendship as well.

I would have these 3 – Ruby, Amanda, and Jane – a human trinity, a divinely human trinity -- holding hands, smiling, and skipping down the sidewalk on their way to school.

I don’t know what Jesus drew in the sand, but Ruby, Amanda, and Jane would be an artistic reminder of past injustices but also and even more, an image of a more joyous future.

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With gratitude to my friend, Nancy Gladwell, I’ve brought with me the diptych that she and Jasmine Oyola, a Black artist, a former student at the Lyme Academy of Fine arts worked on together as part of our Public Art for Racial Justice Education.

We all should feel rightfully proud to have Nancy as a member of our church. Every time I walk into the Sheffield Auditorium, two of my favorite people – Rutherford Sheffield and Amy Henry -- are right there: Rutherford Sheffield will always be an usher or the innkeeper for our Christmas pageant and Amy Henry will always be one of our most beloved Sunday School teachers, and there they are, brought back to life thanks to Nancy’s skills as an artist, her ability to portray both the seen and the unseen, her uncanny eye for detail but also through the use of light enabling us to see the spirit, the humanity, the child of God in those she portrays.

This diptych – two paintings hinged together – is already on the move, traveling between schools, libraries, faith communities, art galleries to encourage conversation on what it will take to create the **beloved community**, envisioned by Martin Luther King.

Nancy painted the one on the left. It shows the Edmund Pettus Bridge on that painful day, now known as **Bloody Sunday** in 1965. You look at that painting, and you remember the painful events of that day, the Ku Klux Klan and the violence and the bloodshed and you might very understandably say, “there’s no hope for our human race. There will always be hatred and xenophobia in our human family. White people and Black people will be forever separated. Too much water over the dam. Too much has gone wrong.

But then, you look at the other side of this diptych, and you see a very different picture. You see the very same bridge, arcing toward justice. You see a white child and a black child smiling and standing, side by side. You see someone holding up a sign that says, “We are one”.

Jasmine would have liked to be with us today, but alas, she's pregnant and lives in Virginia, and so, she sent some notes about the painting on the right. This is what she says:

“In this painting I have created my own take on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. My vision was to represent hope, a new hope. As we can see, history tends to repeat itself. This event took place decades ago, but we find ourselves once again facing very similar events in our society. I wanted to focus more on the positive future and changes we can make together in these trying times.

“In this painting we have a diverse group of people joining together in solidarity. Their faces share smiles of joy and hope, not distress or worry. American flags sprinkle the canvas, as we are all united together as one under one nation.

“In the background, the Edmund Pettus Bridge shoots across the yellow skies and deep waters. Arches of the bridge represent togetherness. They reach across waters and land to bring people together and bridge the gap of the past and the future for a better tomorrow. I chose to go with a color palette that was full of vibrancy and energy.

“These colors bounce off one another while also complimenting each other, like the individuals in the painting. Overall, **hope** is my mission with this piece. I hope to bring a smile and a positive outlook to our trying times. Let's hope one day we can look back at history and this diptych and say we've made it!”

We finally crossed that bridge!

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With a scared frightened woman on one side, and an angry self-righteous mob on the other, Jesus, standing the middle, knelt down, and he drew something in the sand. Use your imagination, what did he draw?

Amen

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