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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: I Corinthians 13: 4-6; Ephesians 4: 1-7, 11-16
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Telling Truths in Church

“Galileo’s head was on the block, the crime was looking up the truth”
-The Indigo Girls

(Love) does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
-I Corinthians 13: 6

Back in 1962, a scientist named Thomas Kuhn published a book that wound up changing almost every field of inquiry in both the sciences and the humanities. It was called *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and it details how huge paradigm shifts have taken place in human thought since the Renaissance. In essence, it’s a book about how people, and cultures, change their minds. Though the book is primarily about the likes of Copernicus, Galileo and Newton, it includes a story about ordinary perception that I find important for understanding the cultural moment we’re inhabiting. Kuhn describes an experiment undertaken in 1949, where ordinary people are asked to identify a series of playing cards. Most of the cards were exactly as one would expect, but a few anomalous cards had also been thrown in – a black six of hearts, for example, or a red eight of spades. As the rate of exposure increased, and as the sequences extended, almost all of the people in the experiment misidentified the anomalous cards. If they were shown a red eight of spades, they would identify it as black. If shown a black six of hearts, they would identify it as red. Their brains corrected the anomaly, reconfiguring what they saw in order to conform to preexisting patterns. Most people adjusted themselves when asked to look again, but a few of the subjects in the experiment found themselves in distress. One of them exclaimed: “I can’t make the suit out, whatever it is. It didn’t even look like a card that time. I don’t know what color it is now or whether it’s a spade or a heart. I’m not even sure now what a spade looks like. My God!”¹

If that can happen in the identification of playing cards, Kuhn suggests, imagine what happens when people are confronted with paradigm shifts that alter their very understanding of the cosmos – a spherical earth, say, or a heliocentric, rather than a geocentric world, or planetary motion, or the evolution of the human species. The cognitive dissonance is overwhelming, largely because an entire story is being supplanted by a newer one, one that, initially, doesn’t look or sound at all plausible to uninitiated laypeople. And so, backlashes ensue. Those committed to conveying new truths, new information, and a new story, like Galileo, are frequently subjected to silence, or to punishment. Contra the Indigo Girls, Galileo’s head was never on the block. But he *was* placed under house arrest by papal authorities, where he remained for nearly a decade until his death. Speaking new or unpopular truths can be a costly enterprise when those truths challenge the prevailing understanding of the way things are.

That experiment, along with Kuhn’s historical analysis of paradigm shifts in the sciences, is profoundly helpful just now, and for a number of different reasons. First, they can help us to read the paradigm changes that we’re currently undergoing, and to respond with empathy to

¹ Kuhn, Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pgs. 62-64.

those who have been thrown into distress by the shift in patterns taking place before their eyes. Climate change, for example, or new understandings of how to teach the history of the United States, or changing racial, sexual, and gender identities, or the fact that within a little more than a decade, white people of European descent will be a minority in the United States – these have produced, in many, a response akin to the person who can't absorb the anomalies in the playing cards, only now magnified a thousand-fold. Kuhn's book can help us to see that it isn't necessarily ignorance or meanness of spirit that afflicts many people, but rather a human trait that afflicts us all in different ways – the challenge of perceiving alterations in patterns, and then adjusting our cognition to those alterations.

But second, Kuhn helps us to understand the importance of the Galileo's of the world, the truth tellers, who calmly, reasonably, and sometimes passionately, testify to the necessity of adjusting our understanding. Those are the individuals that are labeled, in different settings, prophets or whistleblowers. They are, in the words of the famed rabbi Abraham Heschel, those who speak an octave too high, high enough that some cannot hear them, while others find ways to avoid what feels like an intolerable noise. The trick, if one happens to speak in those higher registers, is to do it in a way that, as the book of Ephesians has it, the truth is spoken in love. Or as the book of I Corinthians has it, the telling of truths is done in the same spirit in which love itself is said to behave: with patience and kindness, without arrogance, or rudeness, or boasting.

Here and there and now and then, individuals have managed to do just that. To speak hard, painful, and sometimes divisive truths in a spirit of love and of profound respect – even when the truth feels like a wound. What I wish to do today is to tell you about one particular truth teller that you'll shortly have the opportunity to get to know just a little better. It's a story about the cost, both personal and institutional, of telling the truth. But I also hope it's a reminder, to each of us, of the value of standing firm upon principals laid out in the Scriptures – principles of speaking the truth in love, yes, but also of protecting the vulnerable when prevailing paradigms have been the cause of historic wounds or ongoing pain. In our world today, we need an army of those who are willing to do just that – to testify, in the name of a new paradigm, to truths that many would seek to dismiss.

The story I'd like to share has to do with Jason Berry, the director of the film that we'll be screening next week, *City of a Million Dreams*, about funeral traditions in New Orleans. Jason is gifted on a number of levels. In addition to being a film maker, he's a deeply insightful chronicler of the musical history and culture of the city of New Orleans. That's how I initially came to his work several years ago. But there's another side of his work that is equally defining, a side we won't be able to explore in depth next week. But I want you to know about it, because for decades now, Jason Berry has engaged in a heroic act of truth telling, one that has cost him, but one that the rest of the world has finally caught up to. After some hard decades in the wilderness, people began listening to what Jason was saying.

The best way to understand that aspect of Jason's work is to recall a short scene from the Oscar winning film *Spotlight*, in 2015. I'm sure you remember the film well, about the Catholic clergy sex abuse scandal that engulfed the city of Boston, but you may not remember this small scene. In it, reporters from the *Boston Globe* are trying to come to terms with the full extent of the abuse and cover-ups that had taken place, and a survivor of that abuse hands a book to a young reporter. "Have you read Jason Berry's book?" the survivor asks. The reporter, a little dazed and overwhelmed, shakes her head no, and then accepts a copy of a book entitled *Lead Us Not Into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children*. Jason Berry published that book back in 1992. Now, the *Globe* was doing its reporting in 2001. They published in 2002.

The film about that reporting wasn't released for another 13 years. By that time, the newspaper had received a Pulitzer Prize for its investigation of the story, and the film went on to receive several Academy Awards, including Best Picture. But Jason had been there thirty years before the film, and he was there almost twenty years prior to *Globe*. He first began reporting on clergy abuses and the cover ups back in 1985. But back then, no one wanted to listen. The prevailing paradigms of the day didn't allow most people to perceive, let alone understand, how the Church could have engaged in, and then sheltered that kind of abuse for so long. Jason received neither a Pulitzer nor an Oscar for telling difficult truths. It did, however, come with a significant cost – to his livelihood, to his reputation, to his friendships, and to his faith.

Jason was raised in a devout Catholic household. He was, and he remains, a person of deep personal faith. He was educated by the Jesuits in New Orleans, which continued when he enrolled at Georgetown for college. About his own faith life these days, Jason shared with me that he considers himself a disappointed Catholic in constant search of a good liturgy, whether inside or outside the Church. It's that search, and also, I suspect, that disappointment, that drew him to the street celebrations and rituals that he documented so lovingly in his film. Those rituals represent a sacred liturgy that is neither controlled by a church hierarchy, nor closeted behind church walls. They live freely and openly out in the streets, and are guided by improvisation and spiritual depth, all of which stands in stark contrast to the pattern of secrecy and deception that he uncovered within the institution that had nurtured him.

But how did it all begin? Back in 1984, when he was an expectant father, Jason was an aspiring novelist who was doing journalism to help pay the bills. That's when he received a tip from a local prosecutor about a case that was happening in nearby Lafayette. A priest was being tried for pedophilia. That alone was deeply disturbing to the soon to be father. But what the prosecutor handed to Jason was more troubling still. It was a pile of depositions revealing that bishops had simply shuffled the priest around to different churches and schools whenever he ran into trouble. Jason began writing the story, and then he shopped it to large newspapers and media outlets. No one wanted to touch it. Finally, he reached out to an editor from a national Catholic newspaper, who let him know that similar, at that time unreported, allegations had been rumored to have occurred in other parts of the country – New York and Minneapolis, Chicago, Seattle, everywhere. In quick order, victim after victim got in touch to share their stories. That's when Jason knew he was onto something huge. In a recent profile, *The New York Times* drew the comparison to Watergate, with Jason in the role of Woodward and Bernstein, with the White House now swapped out for the Vatican. The overarching question, borrowing from Watergate, wasn't "Follow the money," although Jason did just that in a subsequent book. Rather, the question was "What did the Vatican know, and when did they know it?" It soon became clear that they knew everything, and that they knew it from at least as far back as the 1960's and 1970's, and maybe long before that.

By now a young father, Jason began churning out articles meant to draw attention to the pattern of abuse, hoping not only for a response, but for a public reckoning for the church he continued to call his own. For six and a half years, he chased those stories, compiling them into *Lead Us Not Into Temptation*, the book the survivor hands to the young reporter in the *Spotlight* film. The book, in turn, led to a whirlwind of media appearances on news programs and on talk shows. But it was all a flash in the pan, and the subject soon was changed. Apologies were made, lawsuits were settled out of court, but no substantial reform was made. As often as Jason spoke and wrote about the pattern of abuse and cover-ups, no one within the church hierarchy was willing to listen. Nor, really, were people in the pews. To do so would have required a paradigm

shift, an ability to see not the shapes one was trained by long habit to perceive, but other shapes, ones that challenged one's basic perceptions of the world.

After a decade of waving his arms, trying to get someone to listen, Jason says that his finances were a mess, and his faith was in tatters. Try to imagine holding onto all those stories, and then trying to mobilize against a massive institution with global reach in order to prevent further atrocities from occurring. No one, really, wanted to hear the truths Jason was speaking, but just as importantly, no one was interested, or ever asked, what the effect of carrying these stories was doing to him. Meanwhile, Jason became a father once again, this time to a little girl who was born with both Down Syndrome and congestive heart failure. And much of the time of his working life was involved in the care of his daughter. Though I haven't heard Jason speak about it in quite this way, my impression from afar is that the nurture of his daughter amidst her profound vulnerabilities was somehow informed by the holy, sacred task, with which he had been entrusted in carrying all those painful stories. Conversely, the nurturing and protective role that Jason exhibited as a father seemed to be continuous with his role as a listener, and as a truth teller. His daughter passed away in her teens, and Jason speaks openly about the pain her absence still causes him. But somehow it also seems to link him all the more deeply to the sorrow of those who were betrayed by a church they trusted. In time, Jason found himself drawn to the radical roots of the church, by which he means the parts of it where the roots run deep, toward social justice. And he finds himself returning to church from time to time, because, he says, his daughter loved going to church. And so, he goes there to find her. As for his role as a truth teller, in time the world did catch up, and the Church has begun a process of reform under Pope Francis. There will surely be further revelations, and the damage has been incalculable. But Jason Berry stood firm. He told truths that, initially, no one wished to hear, helping to effect a sea change in public morality. For that, we can give thanks.

So why am I telling you all of this? In part, of course, because I want you to know about this important feature of Jason's work prior to next weekend. But also, because it presents a model for what many people are tasked with doing just now – standing firmly, resisting distortions and telling the truth, no matter the cost. This past week, a number of people from this congregation and throughout the town of Old Lyme gathered to urge our Board of Selectmen to pass a resolution declaring that racism and its effects are a public health crisis. It's an indisputable fact, demonstrated most forcefully in the ways that Covid has affected predominantly white communities, versus how communities composed primarily of people of color have been affected. It's a way for the Old Lyme community to declare to people of color who do live in town, to say nothing of those who work in our town, or worship in this town, or go to school in this town, that we understand, at least in part, the burdens placed upon minority populations, and that we actually care. Further, it's a way of declaring that we're not an island here, but are active participants of a county, of a region, of a state, of a country, all of whom are afflicted by the same disparities and inequities. I'm disappointed to report that the resolution wasn't adopted, and we were met with opposition. And it was discouraging to hear how resistant some people are to the paradigm shift taking place around us. Even so, I get it. As Kuhn reminds us, paradigm shifts are hard. Learning to perceive what we've not been trained to see or notice is hard. But I also need to tell you that I was so proud of the way members and friends of this place conducted themselves. I was proud of the eloquence with which so many people spoke. They testified to the shift occurring all around us, as we do our best to chart paths of empathy, compassion, mutual understanding, and justice. Those members and friends of this community who attended, and who spoke up, did so in the spirit of the Apostle Paul - with patience and with

kindness, with generosity and with love. We didn't prevail, but I still walked home feeling glad for the voices who gestured toward that greater understanding.

This summer, *The New York Times* produced a short film about Jason Berry's work, and it ends with a shot of him sitting down in a church, the last place one might expect to find him after all he has been through. Nevertheless, there he is. In voice over, just before the credits roll, he quotes the Apostle Paul. He says, "Our boast is this...for the testimony of our conscience is that we have behaved in the world...to be decent." It's a fitting coda for one who has sought to tell the truth for a long time. It is a sturdy scaffolding, a firm foundation, upon which people of faith, both near and far, might build their own testimony.