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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Psalm 30; John 14: 1-4; Revelation 21: 9-14
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Twelve Gates to the City: Reflections on New Orleans

We begin with a song made popular by the Rev. Gary Davis, a blues singer from the mid 20th century, "Twelve Gates to the City." Davis took his lyrics from the book of Revelation, at the very end of the Bible, a poetic vision in which a heavenly city, a New Jerusalem, descends from the clouds. That heavenly city could mean a lot of different things, but I understand it to be a representation of what Jesus called the kingdom of God. The kingdom isn't a specific place, but is, rather, something that comes into being at certain heightened moments when we exist in right relationship with one another. It comes into focus when we achieve clarity about our greater purpose in the world, or when the best aspects of our humanity are called forth and actualized. It takes shape - descending upon a cloud, if you will - when enmity is set aside for cooperation, when cowardice is set aside for courage, when duplicity is set aside for straight talk, and when the conditions of the ordinary disclose astounding beauties. It shows up most especially when the lowly and the forgotten are elevated and given new status, as those most honored and most prized by God. The feature I love most about this vision, from both Revelation and Rev. Davis, is that there isn't just any one way to enter into this reality. There are, according to the Bible and to the Reverend, many ways to enter the city, many portals into this heightened state of being that Jesus called the kingdom.

That's as good a way as any to think about how human beings experience God, or, if it's easier for you to say it another way, the sacred, the holy, or the Divine. There isn't any one way, and we in the churches are at our best when we recognize that ours is but one gate into the city. But there are others. Some people get there through other religious or ritual practices. Some people get there through the arts. Some people get there through communion with other people, and some people find it by communing with the natural world. Some people enter by serving others, and some people get there through private meditation.

As a congregation, I would have us be attentive to the great multiplicity of gates that people use to find God, or if you will, the sacred. I would have us learn to celebrate all the many ways that people find their way into that sacred center, ways that are not necessarily our own. "In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places," Jesus said, which is another way of saying much the same thing. The entire world is the house of the One Jesus called Father. And there are all kinds of sacred dwelling places in that great big house.

That's the conviction that's been animating much of my own vision these last several years. This congregation has an extraordinary history of opening itself to other communities, and other ways of entering the sacred. We've done it with Native American traditions and rituals, and we've done it in South African Townships. We've done it in the Haitian countryside and we've done it with our Muslim and our Jewish neighbors. Lately, I've been asking us to consider some of the African and African Diasporic traditions that have too often been marginalized by Protestant communities. It's a way not only of redressing historic wrongs, but also a way of recognizing another beautiful, jeweled, and majestic gate into the holy and the sacred - the New Jerusalem, the kingdom of God.

Last week, twelve members of this congregation visited New Orleans, the most African city in North America, to do just that: to witness the multiple and overlapping sacred visions that unfold within that space. It's a city that I conceive as a sprawling liturgical space, where specific liturgies are performed at different times throughout the calendar year. We were there to witness the events of St. Joseph's Night, one of the most important dates within that city's liturgical calendar. That's the day, and night, when the city's Sicilian Catholics create altars for St. Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. But it's also the night when working class men and women from the city's African American community set aside their workaday clothing and don regal suits made of feathers and beads, majestic works of art that they spend the entire year sewing. They call themselves Black Masking Indians. The suits are crafted after the manner of Plains Indians, as a way of honoring the ways African and Indigenous communities have supported one another in a centuries long effort to preserve their own humanity within a cauldron of genocide, enslavement, segregation, and poverty. They take to the streets on St. Joseph's Night in tribes, small groups of men and women resplendently dressed, marching and chanting to the sound of drums. It's a mysterious tradition that can be likened to a tree, with roots extending as deep as Africa, and with branches extending across the ocean, spreading throughout the Caribbean. Even so, the Black Masking Indians are their own distinctive tradition, and they are simply stunning to behold.

There were other spiritual visions that we explored as well - a church on Sunday morning, a Second Line parade, concerts performed in homes and clubs, and the stories of those who live, create, and sometimes struggle within that great liturgical zone called New Orleans. If there are 12 gates to the heavenly city, we explored most of them.

Two of our current deacons, Beth Hamilton and Martha Gibson joined us, and I've invited both of them to say a few words about what they found and experienced on our journey.

(Rodney Brown: "Oh, what a beautiful city, oh, what a beautiful city, oh, what a beautiful city, twelve gates to the city, Hallelu")

(Martha Gibson Reflections)

(Rodney's Refrain)

(Beth Hamilton Reflections)

For the last couple of years I've had the lines of an Elizabeth Bishop poem on repeat in my head. It's her famous villanelle, One Art. Some of you might already know it but here's how it begins:

The art of losing isn't hard to master
 So many things seem filled with the intent
 To be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
 Of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
 The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:

Places, and names, and where it was you meant
To travel. None of these will bring disaster.

Bishop goes on to recount some of the things she has lost: her mother's watch, beloved houses, cities, two rivers, a continent. I memorized the poem and returned to it constantly as a way of comforting myself, I suppose, about all I had lost. We have all lost much over the last two years and, like all of you no doubt, I have struggled to make sense of the scope of those losses. When Steve asked me to go on the trip to New Orleans, I hesitated. I was exhausted. Work and family stress, compounded by constant anxiety about the pandemic, our beleaguered democracy, a rapidly evolving climate crisis and the threat of global conflict, had left me feeling depleted and, frankly, hopeless. I was struggling to even remember who I used to be – a person who wrote poems late into the night, unaware of the passage of time in my absorption, a person who not infrequently embarrassed my children by dancing and singing around the house. A person who felt joy.

The thought of going to a city I knew only by reputation as either a place of drunken revelry or abject poverty seemed like more stress – albeit of different kinds - at first. But then some deeper instinct kicked in. Now, as I reflect on everything we experienced in New Orleans, I realize that this instinct was a form of self-preservation. Or, since I'm standing in a church, spiritual salvation. The suspicion that I was about to experience something profound happened soon after my plan landed. On the drive into the city from the airport my car passed a sign for Slidell. Suddenly, the words to a Lucinda Williams song sprang into my head. "You took my joy and I want it back. I'm going to go to Slidell and look for my joy. Maybe in Slidell I'll find my joy." Except in my case it was New Orleans. Over the course of the next five days, I and the other members of our group were inundated with evidence that it is possible – and even essential – to experience and spread joy in the face of hardship. Whether that be through composing and playing music that lifts others to dance, or the painstaking work of sewing the exuberant feathered and beaded outfits worn by members of the city's Black Indian tribes, or the communal celebration that occurs when the Black Indians convene, or the shared experience of piling into a second line behind the trombones and dancing through the streets of New Orleans, the underlying message was always the same. This is the life we have, so make the most of it. Live it, create something out of it, celebrate it. Even when it's impossibly hard, as it is for so many of the people of New Orleans, a city that seemed to me to be heartbreaking in both its beauty and its perilousness.

Back to Bishop. Her poem about loss is instructive. Losing your house or even your city – as so many people in New Orleans did after Hurricane Katrina swept away their homes and loved ones – isn't a disaster unless you can't make something new from it. In Bishop's case, it was a poem that lives today and consoles new generations. In the case of the people of New Orleans, their persistent losses and hardships have propelled them to respond by making art that lifts people out of themselves – even if it's only for an hour or two – and allows them to find joy in the communal celebration of being alive.

(Rodney's Refrain)

In the 19th century, the German philosopher Hegel said, “In modernity, we no longer know how to fall on our knees.” Speaking only for myself, I will say that there were times when I simply wanted to fall on my knees. I do not exaggerate when I say that it was something on the order of the holy that we were invited to witness on St. Joseph’s Night, and in the days before and after that night.

This past Tuesday, less than 24 hours after we had departed, a tornado touched down in the lower 9th ward, destroying many of the homes that had been rebuilt after Hurricane Katrina. Just a few nights earlier, our group had witnessed a tribe of Black Masking Indians, the Black Hatchet gang, emerge in their regalia and process through the streets. The tornado was a sign of just how precarious are the lives of those who live, and who create, down in the lower 9th. On your bulletins, you’ll see the image of one of our new friends, NuNu, who lives in the lower 9th, and who, along with her mother, set up a table to provide food for the crews that were cleaning up the devastation. Our church helped to contribute to that effort. To be of service, to be of use, to those living at the forefront of the new global reality of climate change, is yet another of the 12 gates of the city.

I’ll end with a series of questions: if there are 12 gates to the city, if there are many ways into the sacred center of being alive, what are the gates, other than church, that you use? What are the gates that you see others using? Are there moments in your life when you wish to fall on your knees? If not, why? Another question: How, as a church community, do we continue to open ourselves to the many mansions, the many dwelling places in the world house of God? How do we keep expanding our vision, our bandwidth, for the sacred? And finally: What are the times in your life when you’ve managed to transform your sorrow, your struggles - for we all have them - into something creative and resplendent? Are there ways that you’ve sensed, with the Psalmist, God turning your mourning into dancing, clothing your being with an unexpected joy, the way Black Masking Indians manage to do? Those rituals and practices help us understand that we too can reach deep, that we too can produce staggering beauty within our lives, and that we too have the capacity to bring glory into the world. They’re a reminder of what can happen whenever we discover a gateway into that world of the Spirit. Oh, what a beautiful city. Hallelu.