

David Good  
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
Text: Psalm 137 1-4; Jeremiah 6:13-16; Matthew 5: 1-16  
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THE ANCIENT PATHS:  
WHERE ARE THE CAIRNS THAT CAN LEAD US TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

A number of years ago we spent some glorious time up in Borrowdale in the Lake District of England. It's an area that the poet William Wordsworth knew well, and so every step of the way we felt the spirit of the poet in that beautiful and sacred valley between Grasmere and Borrowdale.

We also much enjoyed the challenges of the nearby mountains or "fells" as they would call them. Up on top, on a clear day, you could see forever, but on other days, the mist would come down, and you could barely see the ground beneath your feet.

As such, we gained a real appreciation for the Cairns – a pile of stones – that marked not the quickest way but the safest way down the mountain!

In appreciation for those Cairns, part of the ethic of a hiker is to pick up one or two stones to add a little more height to those Cairns. So, with every successive hiker, the Cairns would then be a little more visible.

In our scripture lesson, the prophet Jeremiah, sick and tired of the violent culture in which he lived, sick and tired of being sick and tired of economic injustice and the duplicity of his culture, offered one of his "Jeremiads" for which he became well known:

**"...from the prophet to the priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, "Peace, peace" when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush."**

(reminds me of how Mark Twain said, "Man is the only animal that blushes... or needs to.")

Jeremiah then goes on to say, **"Thus says the Lord; "Stand by the roads, and look and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls."**

It doesn't take too much observation to see that the culture in which we live is much in need of a "Jeremiad". We live in culture of violence and duplicity. More and more children are victims of gun violence. While some of those who oppose the abolition of deadly automatic weapons are also among those who speak so piously about the Right to Life.

The mist has come down, and we find ourselves sorely in need of those Cairns that could lead us back to the safety, the sanity of those Ancient Paths.

This week as I tried to write this sermon, trying to do justice to Memorial Day and its significance, day after day, I felt slapped down, demoralized by one tragedy after another.

Less than 2 weeks ago, 10 Black people were gunned down in a Topps Friendly Market in Buffalo, New York. Then earlier this week, 21 students and teachers were killed in Uvalde, Texas. I see their faces, 7, 9, 10 year old children, so full of life, so full of promise, and seeing them, I think of all the innocent faces of all the beautiful Sunday school children I have known. I think of the hundreds if not thousands of children I have baptized right here at the foot of these stairs, and I blush, I blush with sorrow for how we as a culture have veered away from those

“ancient paths”, how we no longer walk in the footpaths of Jesus and the prophets, how we have failed to build a world-wide community of compassion for **all** God’s children.

I think of all those children in Ukraine who have lost their parents and their homes. I watch them crying and walking down the road, holding little dolls and stuffed animals in their arms, looking for sanctuary, and I think of how for them the Sunflower is their sacred National flower.

Stream of consciousness being what it is, this reminds me of a glorious field out in South Dakota, near or on the Cheyenne River (Lakota) Sioux Indian Reservation. Acres and acres, hundreds of acres of Sunflowers, and if you sat there all day, you would see their faces moving almost imperceptibly from the East to the West, looking for light, looking for hope.

I think of those Sunflowers, and I think of the children of Ukraine and the children of Buffalo and the children of Uvalde, and yes, the children of Newtown and Columbine, and yes, the children of Russia as well and so many other places, near and far, these are the Sunflowers that are ever so slowly turning toward us and saying with a tear in their eyes, “please, please, for the sake of all children everywhere, remember those Ancient Paths, remember the pathway of Jesus.”

Overwhelmed with sorrow, I remember that old folk song – and you can sing it to yourself or sing it out loud, if you please – “Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing. Where have all the flowers gone, long time ago. When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?”

I brought in these Sunflowers to add to our lamentations.

Lamentations yes, and we all would do well to lament, for the sake of our own sanity and humanity. We would do well to follow the wisdom of Shakespeare, who at the end of King Lear had one of his characters say, “the weight of this sad time, we must obey. Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say....

There’s a time to cry, for that restores our humanity, but there’s also a time to respond, for that restores our dignity and deeper humanity, perhaps even our divinity, for it is “In God that we live and move and have our being.”

Lamentations are good but what is even better is our response, for that quickens “that of God within us”, as the Quakers would say.

I’ve always loved how in Abraham Lincoln we could see humanity and divinity so closely intertwined, sometimes at war, but always intermingled.

I thought of him this last week as I was trying to cope with my own lamentations. I mean here he was on the battlefield of Gettysburg, surrounded by such incredible gore and brutality and yet somewhere, somewhere deep in the melancholy soul of this beleaguered President, this strong, but gentle man “acquainted with sorrow”, found the strength to close his speech with thoughts about the future.

***“It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.”***

Where does that come from? Where does that future orientation come from if not from the Presence of God deep within his soul?

He was far from perfect, but what I love about him is how he was always looking for those **Ancient Paths**, and the ways and means of Jesus could clearly be heard in the language that he used. Listen to that language, saturated with the words of Jesus and the words of Shakespeare:

*With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.*

Surely those words are like a blaze on tree, like a pile of rocks, a Cairn by which we can find our way out of this treacherous time in which we live.

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Which brings us to the mural you see before you this morning.

This is a scaled down version of the mural that was recently completed at the Old Lyme Middle School and is part of the Sister Mural project of our newly created Public Art for Racial Justice Education, PARJE, if you like acronyms.

Shortly after the brutal murder of George Floyd, our friend Maryam Elahi called to ask if I would take part in the Marches for Racial Justice she was organizing. As part of our weekly marches over in Old Saybrook, we also had weekly teach-ins on the steps of The Kate, the Katherine Hepburn Theater in Old Saybrook.

One of our speakers was our good friend, Pastor Jack Madry, pastor of the Madry Temple in New London and a prominent Jazz pianist in our area. I've had the honor of preaching in his church on a number of occasions, even was invited to play the drums for their church's Sunday morning jazz ensemble. A big mistake! Suffice it to say, I was a dismal failure with the drums but much appreciated the grace and love their congregation exemplified!

For his teach-in, Pastor Jack spoke about how the Civil Rights movement was born out of the Blues – there's your Lamentations once again. We rightly remember the legacy of Martin Luther King, but we should also remember the lamentations of Billie Holliday.

God Bless the child that's got his own.

The children of this world need God's blessing, and that blessing has to come from us, the blessing of being able to grow up without fear of violence or hunger, the blessing of a good education so they can grow up to become the children of God they were created to be.

Isn't that their Divine inheritance? "God bless the child that's got his own."

I was deeply moved by Jack's reminder, and at a time when monuments to Confederate Soldiers were being taken down, I began to ponder how public art – music, dance, poetry readings, sculptures, performance art, street theater – could maybe give birth to a new or at least a renewed Civil Rights movement.

Public Art for Racial Justice Education won't, in and of itself, solve anything. Let me be clear about that. It won't resolve any of the complex particularities of our current racial justice issues – the lack of affordable housing, the lack of home ownership for Black and other People of Color, inequities in our health care system, the challenges in the right to vote for racial minorities, and yes the way in which gun violence affects us all but especially, especially our Black and Brown populations.

While we have no illusions about the important work that needs to be done in all these areas, we felt that now is the right time to raise up new works of Public Art that will remind us of "the better angels of our nature" -- to reference Abraham Lincoln once again -- reminders of our true identities as children of God, reminders of the values of our precious held but too often forgotten democratic principles, reminders of racial justice champions past and present, stories of those too long forgotten who deserve to be remembered for their valor and their sacrifice, not only on Memorial Day but every other day as well.

Take for example the top hat and spectacles in the lower right-hand corner of this mural. The artist, Jasmine Oyola Blumenthal, a graduate of the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts, worked for nearly a month with over 60 members of our Middle School to solicit their input on what they would like to see in this mural.

How can this mural help to reflect our collective efforts toward Equity, Diversity and Inclusion? How can we make our schools and communities more welcoming? How can we remember our past injustices, and offer opportunities for Lamentations for those injustices, but how can we also remember those too long forgotten, those whose stories can be like a blaze on a tree, a North Star on a dark night, a cairn of stones, a cairn of stories to help us navigate toward a better future?

The top hat and spectacles are there to remind us of the story of a Black freeman by the name of David Ruggles.

Now, let me ask you, how many of you know the story of David Ruggles? If you don't, you're not alone. I've lived in this community for nearly 50 years, and it wasn't until we established Public Art for Racial Justice Education that I became aware of this man and his remarkable story.

Thanks to our friend, Shiela Hayes, a leader in Public Art for Racial Justice Education and an incredible leader with the NAACP in Norwich, we learned the story of this man, David Ruggles, remembered in this mural by his top hat and spectacles. Born in Lyme in 1830 his family moved to Norwich where he became a leader in the Underground Railroad, working closely with Frederick Douglas, whom he helped to liberate. He loved to read – as his spectacles would suggest – and he went on to establish the first Black owned bookstore, situated in New York City.

David Ruggles knew that the abolition of slavery wasn't enough; he also knew that for Whites and Blacks there also needed to be better opportunities for education, education to overcome ignorance and xenophobia, education to unlock what the poet William Blake called the "mind-forged manacles" from which we all sometimes suffer.

Thanks to Shiela and others, there's now a freedom bell and a David Ruggles' square in front of the City Hall in Norwich, and David Ruggles now holds a prominent position in our Norwich Sister City Mural, painted on a parking garage overlooking the Thames, the first mural in our Sister Mural project. Last Sunday, we dedicated our New London Mural in Fulton Park, and this mural – the larger version – will be celebrated here in Old Lyme on June 12<sup>th</sup> at 2:30. Hope you can join us.

I hope you can come up after the service to ponder the other images in this mural. Sailing in the background, you'll see the Amistad and you'll see a lighthouse, guiding it toward freedom.

In the lower left, you'll see a cairn of stones. The Middle School students were deeply moved by their involvement in the Witness Stones project that commemorates the named and unnamed slaves who lived in our community. They felt strongly that we as a community need to own up to our past injustices, that the only way we can move forward is by remembering where we have been. So, that pile of witness stones is an important cairn by which the students can navigate their way across the stream.

The artist and the students didn't want to emphasize racial diversity by focusing too much on facial stereotypes, and so instead, that diversity is reflected in other ways so that all students can look at this and feel included.

If you look very closely, you'll see a girl wearing a hearing aid. Our schools endeavor to offer a warm welcome to those with special needs. In the middle, you'll see a Black student and a young Muslim woman, not holding hands, this in honor of the Muslim tradition, and yet I like the suspended animation, as if they're reaching out to one another, not sure of what to do, but there to help one another, just in case.

There's a Native American young woman in the middle, who has put down her musical instruments on the bottom left, so she too can join together in friendship with the other students.

The Middle School students wanted to honor our community's gift of hospitality for a number of refugees. Refugee families from Laos, Burundi, Syria, Burma, the Congo, Puerto Rico, Pakistan, Afghanistan and other troubled places all have found welcome here, suggested by this mural. The river may be the quiet waters of the Lieutenant River, but as we know, all rivers can become a raging torrent or a Rubicon from which there is no return.

While this mural celebrates the cross-cultural friendship and hospitality so critically needed by incoming refugees, I also hope it will help us to remember the painful stories of those who never made. It was our collective lamentations for a Syrian boy washed up on a beach in Turkey, that led to the welcoming of a number of Syrian refugee families here in Connecticut, including our Lyme/Old Lyme community.

In the early 80's we proudly welcomed 4 refugee families from Laos. We rightly celebrate how the children became stars on our soccer teams, and how one of the children went on to establish the Morning Glory Café where the Hangry Goose is now. Sichanh Patana now serves on the staff of the Old Lyme Inn.

As we celebrate these victories of hospitality, as we ponder this mural, I also hope we'll remember the tragedy of another refugee family from Laos. The Phengsompones tried to swim across the Mekong River but one of their two children was swept away by the current. Welcoming this grief-stricken family allowed us the opportunity to share with them their Lamentations and help them build a new home for their family. It also forced us to ask the troubling question of why there are so many wars in our human family. What is our complicity in those wars that led to the tragic death of that young boy from Syria and that young girl washed away by the raging waters of the Mekong River?

One snide comment we heard from a woman who should have known better. She wanted to know why the mural depicts a young Jewish student— second from the left -- wearing a yarmulke. Condescendingly, this woman said, "why is that there? Do all Jewish young men wear a yarmulke? While I don't prescribe to the popular wisdom that "there's no such thing as a stupid question", actually, I'm glad she asked that question, for it gave us the opportunity to say that in a nation that has experienced far too many red lines, swastikas and other forms of anti-Semitism, we want our schools to be a welcoming community for all, regardless of whether or not they wear a yarmulke.

Another criticized why it was necessary to include a student wearing the bright rainbow colors of the LGBTQ community.

If ever I'm asked to respond to that question, I'd say, "Let me tell you a story. Let me tell you the story about a young man by the name of Matthew Shepherd, a 21-year-old gay student who was tied to a fence post and beaten to death because of his sexual identity.

We should feel rightfully proud of the children of our Middle School who felt strongly that those bright rainbow colors should be represented in the mural, a bold statement of grace, a statement saying, "this is the community we endeavor to become! Thank God for this reminder!

No doubt the most serious and legitimate criticism we have heard is that “the mural is just too pretty.”

While it reflects the beauty of our community, does it adequately reflect the culture, the nation and the world in which we live?

Why such a **beatific** image? Why not an image more like Picasso’s Guernica, a painting depicting all manner of atrocities. To be honest, I could easily make such an argument myself and trash the mural we created. The Sandy Hook Newtown massacre has now been replicated by the slaughter of Black people in a Buffalo shopping center and children and teachers in a school in Uvalde, Texas.

We live in an entertainment culture in which routinely Blacks, Muslims and especially Arabic speaking people are depicted as villains, and fed by such propaganda, masquerading as entertainment, if automatic weapons are available, why would we be surprised by the serial madness in which we live?

For my response to these questions, I would have you ponder the Cairn on the lower right-hand side of the mural. These are actually a pile of untitled books, and they’re left untitled on purpose, so that we all can ponder what we would include in that cairn.

The students are joining together in friendship as they try to find their way from one cairn to another, and just as up in the fells above Borrowdale, we placed a few rocks on the cairns for future hikers, so we have the opportunity, suggested by this mural, to think about what books we would add to that cairn.

I had a hard time choosing just two, but the ones I’ve selected are both in response to that legitimate question: why such a pretty picture; why such a **beatific** image?

Hold onto that word, “**beatific**” for a moment when I share the second book I would place on the pile. But first, I would have you ponder this skinny yellow book that I would place on that cairn. Some of you know what it is even before I read it or share the author’s name.

Amanda Gorman’s poem, “The Hill We Climb”.

“Somehow, we’ve weathered and witnessed  
A nation that isn’t broken, but simply unfinished...  
(echoes of Abraham Lincoln once again)

We will not march back to what was,  
But move to what shall be:  
A country that is bruised but whole,  
Benevolent but bold,  
Fierce and free....

We will not be turned around,  
Or interrupted by intimidation...

So let us leave behind a country better  
Than the one we were left.  
With every breath from our bronze  
Pounded chests,  
We will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.

Yes, I can see the legitimacy of having a mural more like Guernica, complete with incomplete bodies, severed limbs, reminders of war, but I don't know about you but what I would yearn for our children and us older children as well is images such as this mural, images that remind us of our beautiful and diverse humanity, images of God's creation in all its intricate and delicate harmony, bucolic rivers and streams, and children, joined in friendship, trying to follow the cairns and find their way back to those "ancient roads".

So, the other book I would place on that cairn of books is this one, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. I'll not go into details, but the poet Dante has "lost his way"; he has veered off of those ancient paths of faithfulness and now finds himself spiraling further down into the darkness of despair. At the entrance to hell, he sees a sign that says, "Abandon All Hope Ye who enter here."

But Beatrice, who is in Paradise comes to his rescue, and I hope you see the similarities between the word Beatrice and the word Beatific.

Our job as faith communities is to keep singing the song of Beatrice even and especially when we find ourselves in exile, a long way from home. Our job as Christians, Muslims, Jews, Bahai, Sikhs is to keep on with our artistic renderings of Beatrice even and especially when we find ourselves up to our necks in the raging waters of Babylon, Buffalo, Newtown, Uvalde, the Ukraine and yes, even the Russian river of the Volga for I can't imagine a more important place for the Lord's song to be heard to provide encouragement for the courageous people there who protest the Putin regime, to be heard by those held in prison because they dared to speak truth to power, for the sake of a 77 year old woman who protested the war and was last seen being dragged off by police, for the young courageous women of Pussy Riot in Russia who refuse to be silent in the face of militarism and oppression.

In honor of them I would go home and play, Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" over and over again, for who cannot hear that lyrical music and not hear the gentle voice of Beatrice calling us out of the spirals of hell and hopelessness in which we live?

When Steve called the other day he shared how his daughters are taking dance lessons.

So, as I listen to Swan Lake, I'll give thanks for Rachael and Steve's daughters, learning how to dance. We need more ballerinas up on their toes teaching us to be up on our toes as well. We need dancers and the artistry they exemplify to remind us of the capacities of the human spirit.

Yes, we could have had a mural painted in blood, one more illustration of the failures of the human community, one more delineation of systemic injustice, one more reason to throw our hands up in despair, but I love this mural precisely because it is oppositional to the reality in which we live, precisely because of its heroic defiance.

We need the voice of Beatrice now more than ever, and for me, I found that voice in a young Black poet by the name of Amanda Gorman. So proudly I would place this skinny yellow book together with Dante's Divine Comedy on that Cairn of books.

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

We need to be Beatrice for each other. We need to be Beatrice for the people of Ukraine and the people of Russia. We need to be Beatrice for the people of Buffalo and the people of Uvalde. We need the color yellow on the artist's palette to remind that yes, we live in a Guernica

world. “The night is dark and we are far from home”, but thank God, thank God, there are those who can show us the way back to those Ancient Paths. Together, walking that road, we can help each other through our lamentations, and we can rediscover the joy of being part of the “Kingdom” of God.” Amen

David W. Good

Minister Emeritus, The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme