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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Text: Genesis 1: 1-2, 26-31
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“Be Happy Whenever You Can Manage It”

“In the beginning, God created...”

So begins the King James Version of the Bible. Or, as Eugene Peterson’s translation, *The Message*, puts it: “First this: God created...” It’s the first morsel of information we have about this character, God, or about anything in the Bible for that matter. Before there is love, before there is conflict or alienation, before there is anything at all, there is this act of divine creativity. We take it for granted, but it’s not the way most origin stories about the world begin. Usually, the beginning of all things is described as a problem to be solved, a conflict to be resolved. In *The Enuma Elish*, the creation story on which Genesis 1 is based, Apu and Tiamat mingle their waters together in order to form the other gods, but creation, and creativity itself, comes later. It’s the same in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* - there, the beginning has to do with resolving primal conflicts, but not, really, with creating anything. Genesis is different. In the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures, everything begins from an act of creativity.

That’s important, because a few verses later, when human beings enter the picture, they’re created in the very image of God, having God’s nature. Up to that point, the only thing we know about God, is that God creates. Above all else, then, to be made in the image of God must mean, at the very least, that a creative impulse is somehow a constitutive part of what it means to be a human being. There are needs that must be met for every person - for food and shelter, but also for touch, love, companionship, and so on, and the first chapter of the Bible details those needs. But having been created in the image of God, the text implies that the need for creativity stands prior to all of those other physical necessities. We need food, but we also burn with creative power. We need love, but we also have wells of creativity within us that yearn to be tapped. We need shelter, but we’re also restless with creative potential that needs to be expressed if we are to be fully human.

In saying that the exercise of our creative faculties is essential to our humanity, I don’t mean that we all have an artist or performer somewhere inside of us. We might well, but there are also plenty of people who have little interest, to say nothing of aptitude, for the arts. My claim - and that of Genesis - is broader. To be creative in the widest sense of the word is to have one’s being - one’s mind, body, emotions, even one’s soul, engaged toward the realization of some project or goal, even one that is without why. I take it that electricians, plumbers, mechanics, stonemasons and similar labor is every bit as creative, in their ways, as art and design. I take it that a scientist solving a problem or a teacher mapping out a classroom plan is every bit as creative, in their ways, as acting or performing in a band. Conversely, the arts can be as repetitive and soulless as pushing papers at a desk if one’s critical capacities aren’t engaged. Creativity, in other words, takes many forms. I believe we all have it somewhere within us.

I got to thinking about all of this when I was watching a cabaret that my daughters performed in a few weeks ago, along with several other young people from this community. It was delightful. Everyone sang beautifully, and from what I could tell, everyone seemed to have fun both preparing for the performance, and then actually doing it. The audience wasn’t big -

mostly parents and friends - and nobody pretended that we were at the Met, or Carnegie Hall. It was local art at its best - organic, open to all, generous of spirit, and most importantly, it was DIY. It seemed to make everyone happy, and I was glad for that.

My own happiness, though, was clouded by other thoughts. What happens to all that creativity as we grow up? Where does it go as we age? Are we tricking kids when we encourage them to tap into all of this beautiful creativity, when, as a society, there are so few outlets for creative expression when the years of schooling are through? A few folks are fortunate - that creativity translates into a vocation. But for many, opportunities to create and to make and to build dry up. Even those who are lucky enough to have translated their creativity into a vocation must fight against a routinization that can set in. That struggle is compounded, for all of us, by the passivity that our screens tend to induce in us, as “content” is pumped out, and into, and through us. Little by little, as we grow and age, if we’re not very intentional, all of the creativity that we’re born with, and that needs to come to expression if we are to thrive, can atrophy. Sometimes, if we’re honest, it can feel as though something inside of us has shriveled and died.

Except maybe it doesn’t quite die. A sociologist at the University of Houston named Brene Brown put it this way: “Unused creativity is not benign,” she said. “It metastasizes. It turns into grief, rage, judgment, sorrow, and shame.” There are an awful lot of things afflicting the world right now, and I don’t wish to be naive or simplistic, but I’ve started to wonder if some of it might have to do with being cut off from our creativity. Yes, there are structural injustices and yes, weather patterns are going haywire, and yes, the pandemic and wars and rumors of wars are having consequences in ways we hadn’t anticipated. But I wonder if one of the reasons we’ve had greater trouble coping with those realities is that over the years, some of the things that human beings have used to buffett themselves during difficult times have been stripped away. I’m speaking in generalities now, and there will always be exceptions, but I tend to think that one of the ways we suffer most is that communal forms of creative expression no longer exist for us. For most of us, the only song we can sing by heart is “Happy Birthday.” If we were asked to share a story about who we are and where we’ve come from, many of us would struggle. Few of us know how to dance, save by swaying in rhythm, and some of us find that challenging. A handful of us still know how to build things, but mostly we call on professionals to do those things for us. We consume culture, but save for a select few, we don’t actively produce it. That’s a relatively new thing in the history of the world, and I wonder if it’s one of the reasons Brene Brown’s words about untapped creativity seem so accurate.

This is where I’d like to pivot, from describing a problem, or a need, to describing not quite a solution, but an intervention. My pivot comes by way of a story. Not long ago, I learned about a woman who tried to address that deep yearning for creativity in human life during another turbulent moment. It’s an unlikely story, one that applies, I believe, not only to artists, but to each of us, whether we’re artistically inclined or not. Importantly, I think her insights also apply to the life of faith, which, I would argue, is one of the most powerful forms of creative expression available to us. But first the story.

Sister Corita Kent was a nun who taught at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles in the 1950’s and 60’s. She entered her religious order at a young age, but then went on to study art at the University of Southern California. That led to her teaching post, but it also led her to begin experimenting with her own creative expression. She was drawn to the Pop Art productions of people like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein in those days, and so she bought a silk screen printmaking kit, and taught herself how to use it. You can watch videos of her doing

it - in her habit! She was good at it, and soon, people took notice. Soon, her classes became a gathering place for avant-garde artists everywhere. Immaculate Heart College, and Sister Corita's studio, attracted visitors like Alfred Hitchcock, John Cage, Saul Bass, Buckminster Fuller and Charles and Ray Eames. In 1967, Sister Corita even landed on the cover of Newsweek, in a story about how she was combining her teaching and printmaking with her religious convictions. She was an outspoken critic of the war in Vietnam, and her screen prints could be seen at protests around the country. As her popularity grew, the archdiocese to which she belonged became more and more agitated. Predictably, Immaculate Heart was decried as being too "liberal" by the cardinal, and Sister Corita herself was accused, again all too predictably, of being a "communist." Some things never change. Ultimately, she left her religious order, and continued practicing her vocation in Cambridge.

Sister Corita distilled her convictions into a manifesto, a set of rules that she hung in her teaching studio, and that she used as means of encouraging her students to locate whatever creative wellsprings were within them. They actually comprise our second, extra-canonical, Scripture reading for the morning, and so let me read them to you now. You can also find them reprinted in your bulletin. Here they are:

RULE ONE: Find a place you trust, and then try trusting it for a while.

RULE TWO: General duties of a student — pull everything out of your teacher; pull everything out of your fellow students.

RULE THREE: General duties of a teacher — pull everything out of your students.

RULE FOUR: Consider everything an experiment.

RULE FIVE: Be self-disciplined — this means finding someone wise or smart and choosing to follow them. To be disciplined is to follow in a good way. To be self-disciplined is to follow in a better way.

RULE SIX: Nothing is a mistake. There's no win and no fail, there's only make.

RULE SEVEN: The only rule is work. If you work it will lead to something. It's the people who do all of the work all of the time who eventually catch on to things.

RULE EIGHT: Don't try to create and analyze at the same time. They're different processes.

RULE NINE: Be happy whenever you can manage it. Enjoy yourself. It's lighter than you think.

RULE TEN: "We're breaking all the rules. Even our own rules. And how do we do that? By leaving plenty of room for X quantities." (John Cage)

HINTS: Always be around. Come or go to everything. Always go to classes. Read anything you can get your hands on. Look at movies carefully, often. Save everything — it might come in handy later."

I don't know about you, but I'd love to find a school that organized itself around rules like that. But I'd also like FCCOL to be the kind of place where those values are practiced. I fervently hope this is a place you can trust, and that you can try trusting it for a while. I hope that in our Sunday School and on our Boards, we try to pull the best out of one another. I hope that our worship services might sometimes be treated as experiments. I hope that we continue showing up in the world, always hanging around, coming or going to everything, because that's when we're likely to catch on to things. I hope that we break the rules, even our own rules, as

we leave plenty of room for X quantities, which might be what we call the work of the Spirit. I'd love if we could practice such things as a community, but I'd also be glad if each of our individual lives could be conducted in such a way.

Above all, I'm drawn to rule nine: Be happy whenever you can manage it. Enjoy yourself. It's lighter than you think. It was a rule that was written, and practiced, amidst roiling controversies in the United States, and amidst growing criticism from her superiors, who deemed her work "blasphemous." The clause "whenever you can manage it" is not to be taken lightly, or dismissed, for there were times that Sister Corita did *not* manage it. Neither, of course, do we. And yet, it's a rule worth abiding as often we can, for that too might be a part of our creative work. To interject moments of enjoyment into our days, and into the days of others. To remind ourselves that it's lighter than we think. To insist, as one poet puts it, upon pleasure, even in the ruthless furnace that the world can so often be. That's neither frivolous, nor insensitive. It's a lesson that has been demonstrated for us over and over in our many partnerships. It's a vision that can be discovered in the West Bank and in Haiti, in Soweto, in South Dakota, and in New Orleans. It was also a lesson demonstrated in the art that Sister Corita herself made. The colors were loud. The language she employed was bold. The contrasts and juxtapositions she arranged were arresting. Their verve and splendor were a reminder, even amidst the gloomiest realities of the 60's, 70's, and 80's, that God hadn't abandoned the world, that happiness didn't need to feel remote, and that joy was still attainable. More than anything, that, rather than a particular art object, was Sister Corita's act of creation.

You too have been given a wellspring of creativity. You too have been given a life to create and to shape over time. You too have been given a world to make, in your everyday. Do it well. Don't be afraid to stand out from the crowd, even if you risk censure. Be happy whenever you can manage it. Enjoy yourself. It may be your greatest creative work.