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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Luke 17: 11-19; Philippians 4: 4-7
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Shelter, Speech, and Solace: A Litany of Thanks

A preacher in the pulpit is like a batter at the plate. Sometimes we swing for the bleachers, and sometimes we even make contact. The ball soars. Sometimes we swing and connect with nothing but air. And then there are times when we seek to move the game along with something smaller, a bunt, or a base hit. Today is such a Sunday. Communion makes it so. And since a holiday week is upon us, I thought I'd structure this morning's run to the bases, if such it is, around the story of the healed man in Luke's Gospel who returns to Jesus in order to give thanks. Ten people were healed. Only one expressed gratitude. That's an all too common dynamic that likely afflicts us nearly as much as it did those ten healed people. Perhaps that's because when things are going well for us, we tend not to see all the ways we have been dependent upon small graces, and sometimes large ones, in order for our lives to function well. Sometimes it takes work to be the one who returns to give thanks, rather than just getting on with things.

I have three areas for which I'd like to give thanks today. They each pertain to this community, but they pertain to the lives we seek to construct for ourselves as people of faith and conscience as well. Those three areas can be summed up in this way: we offer gratitude for shelter; we offer thanks for speech, for the gift of words that are true; and we offer appreciation for the solace of one another. A word about each.

First, shelter. Nearly two months have passed since work on replacing the roof of the Meetinghouse was begun, and it's been nearly a month since the scaffolding has come down. We had a long lead up to that project, including a lot of research and a lot of meetings and a lot of discussions about how that work was going to be funded. This summer we sent out a letter to the congregation, to all of you, sharing our need. But since the work was completed, we haven't had a moment to catch our breath, and to tell you how it all came together. We haven't had a chance to thank you. It's easy not to notice something like a new roof, and in a way, that's as it should be - it's when it falls apart that you do notice it. But have a look up there sometime - and notice the copper rim around the roof to help catch snow melt. And notice the tiles that, with any luck, will provide shelter for the better part of the next century to those who enter this Meetinghouse. Because of your generosity, we were able to pay for the roof in full, without any debt. I have been a part of institutions that, for understandable reasons, have been forced to allow their physical infrastructure to crumble. I have been a part of institutions that, for what are for the most part understandable reasons, have been forced to shoulder financial debt that has been crippling. And so one of the reasons I'm thankful this season is that this house of faith, this shelter, remains stable, strong, and secure. Amidst all we have come through these past few years, amidst all the challenges that we have all faced individually, I'm grateful for the shelter that this community of faith has provided, and will continue to provide, in the decades to come. And so we give thanks for shelter. Let it also be a reminder of the responsibilities we bear to help ensure that others find the shelter they need, whether figuratively or literally, from life's stormy blasts.

Second, I wish to give thanks for speech, for words, that tell the truth. For the past several years, we've been assaulted by distortions, boasts, and gaslighting lies that have attempted to shred our hold on reality. This season I'm grateful for the teachers, for the public leaders, for the librarians, for the artists, and for all the ordinary people who, in large ways and small, find ways to speak words that are true, in ways that cut through the fog and the haze that can sometimes overcome us all.

Because we're about to celebrate Thanksgiving, I thought I'd highlight the work of one truth teller from whom I've learned a great deal over the past several years about the history of New England. Wendy Warren is a professor of history at Princeton, and she wrote a book a few years ago called *New England Bound* which turned my own understanding of early American history on its head. One memorable story that she shares concerns Squanto, the Indigenous man who approached the Pilgrims after the miserable winter of 1620 and 1621. We all know about Squanto, and school children are still told about his assistance every year at about this time. No one, it turns out, asks how it is that Squanto understood English. Warren supplies the details. They're grim, but they're also true. In 1614, Squanto had been lured onto a ship with some 24 other native people, for what was supposed to be a meeting between the Natives and the English. All 24 were kidnapped and sold into slavery. The ship was under the general oversight, from afar, of John Smith, of Pocahontas fame, but its captain was a man named Thomas Hunt. Hunt's actions were the cause of general opprobrium among other English traders, and it had long lasting consequences in New England. News of the kidnapping spread, and members of many Indigenous communities developed a general hatred and distrust toward the English.

The captives were taken to Malaga, Spain to await further sale, and transport elsewhere. When it became clear where the Indians had come from, a group of Spanish priests intervened, and took some of the captives to be "instructed in the Christian faith." Squanto was among them. Somehow, after that he managed to find his way from Spain to England, where he became the servant to a man tasked with establishing a colony in Newfoundland. That's when he learned English, and waited for an opportunity to sail back to North America. When that opportunity presented itself, Squanto returned to his village, only to find that most, if not all, of his family and village had died of smallpox. Ironically, captivity abroad protected Squanto from the epidemic. Later, William Bradford, the governor of Plymouth, wrote with delight that "Squanto continued with them and was their interpreter and was a special instrument sent of God for their good..." I suspect that Squanto himself might have wished not to be an instrument of Bradford's God.¹

I cite that story, and Wendy Warren's excellent book, as a means of highlighting the necessary, constant, work of exercising critical thought about what Flaubert once called "the non-thought of received ideas," or that Milan Kundera calls "kitsch," a tendency toward simplistic, banal, and antiseptic stories about the world that we all can be tempted toward - especially in history, and especially in religion. Instead, our stories need to be as complex and as contradictory as the world in which we live. They need to be as complex and contradictory as the lives that we lead. And so I'm grateful to writers and thinkers like Wendy Warren who use words to help us grasp the truth of our founding narratives more fully. They work in the spirit of John Robinson, the leader of the Pilgrims, whose words we sang and spoke earlier in our service: "God hath yet more truth and light to break forth..." In the same way, I'm grateful that this church has committed itself to the long, and sometimes painful process, of truth telling, and truth seeking - through the Witness Stones, through our Stories from the Deep North, the Tree of Life,

¹ Warren, Wendy, *New England Bound* (New York: Liveright Books, 2016), pgs. 3-5.

and through so many of our other vital ministries. In a moment rife with a will to bury or ignore difficult truths, we can offer thanks to all those who tenaciously insist on those words that begin one of our founding documents: “we hold these truths...” And so we give thanks for speech, and for words, that capture something of “these truths.”

Finally solace. Throughout these strange and difficult years, I’ve never been more grateful to be a part of a community such as this, which can provide some measure of the solace that we all crave. Everyone finds that in a different way, I know, and everyone has particular needs, but there are so few places left that people still gather with one another, body unto body, face unto face, flesh unto flesh in a communal way. We were already an atomized society prior to the pandemic, but that’s been hastened and intensified these past few years. I mean, even the movie theaters in our area have closed - the one in Westbrook is gone, the one in Branford is gone, and the one in Niantic appears to be hanging on by a thread. We don’t have many places to gather anymore. I’m thankful that is one of them, for you have been solace to me, and for me.

In the middle of the 20th century, at another inflexion point of history, Simone Weil wrote that “the love of one’s neighbor, in all of its fullness, simply means being able to say, “What are you going through?”² That question can happen in digital space, it’s true. But sometimes we have to sit next to somebody, or speak with one another for a little bit, before we even know to ask the question. Without physical proximity, in other words, we often simply don’t see, or sense, that someone might benefit from that basic question, “What are you going through?”

Whether it feels that way in every single moment or not, that’s why it’s important to be together in this space. Whether it feels that way or not, that’s why it’s important to share the sacrament of communion together - as a way of affirming, our togetherness in bodily space, our union with one another even across our differences. Whether it feels that way or not, that’s why it’s important to sing together, to pray together, to speak together and to listen together. It helps us to understand, for ourselves, what it is that we are going through. And it helps us to be present to one another, that we might attend to what we each are going through. And so I’m grateful for the solace that we each stand a chance of discovering in this place. And I’m grateful for the ways each of you provide that solace toward one another, and to me as well.

As we eat the bread and drink the cup this morning, let us remember the importance of being among those who return to give thanks for all we have, for so much in our lives is dependent upon the goodness of others. Let us remember with thanks the gifts of shelter, of words and stories that bear the mark of truth, and of the solace we find in one another, and in a vibrant and still living spiritual tradition. Let us be among those who return to give thanks, for the many and varied gifts we have been given.

² Weil, Simone, “*Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,*” contained in *Waiting for God*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 2000), pgs. 57-66.