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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Matt 3:13-17
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On the Banks of the East River: Belovedness Over Cups of Coffee

And a voice from heaven said, *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”* Matt 3:17

Yesterday, our church youth group and dedicated parents drove a couple of hours to the east side of Manhattan to serve a pop up breakfast to folks living on the street. We do this every fall with an organization called *The Midnight Run* which you heard something about during our Children's Message.

There's something about waking at the crack of dawn and driving to another city to set up tables with sandwiches, donuts, and clementines on a cold street corner for whomever shows up that reminds you of what the gospel is *really* about.

There's something of the messy manger in the privilege of offering someone a warm sweater and extra pair of gloves while you get to return home in a cozy car filled with gas. There's something in the eye contact and conversations between “us” and “them” that spontaneously pops up over a second cup of hot coffee that brings the belovedness of each person to life.

Epiphanies glimmer in the grittiness of the morning sun, no matter what side of the plastic card tables you're standing on.

It's not lost on me that this is a River Jordan moment along the freezing waters off the East River with those of us with eyes to see beyond the glare. Here, as we pass around the donut holes and winter hats, we're given a chance to see into the heart of one another and a God who comes to walk the walk with us. It is the Incarnation in full swing on First Avenue.

After we clean up, we find a warm diner and the teenagers talk about someone they met. We grapple with the dilemma of what we saw at the two sites where we served and wondered how we might help to end housing insecurity for homeless families in our lifetimes.

We talked about why some people have more than enough and others barely have a pillow on which to lay their heads.

As we served the Saturday breakfast, NY City data showed that 64, 222 adults and children were in the shelter system. And, nearly half of that number included children. In addition, 13,000 of those needing a place to sleep last night were asylum seekers.

These mind blowing numbers of people needing shelter are just for ONE day. Putting faces and names to numbers is one way to crack open our hearts and dissolve the arbitrary walls that separate us. Financial

Instructed the 16th century mystic, Teresa of Avila, *“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through*

which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

Teaching our children well is something I think we take pretty seriously here at FCCOL as we seek to give each child in God's Neighborhood and PF a sense not only of their belovedness— and belonging— but also, a sense of what it means to care for other people... here at home and also around the world. We spend time not only reading a scripture story but relating it to our lives today. What does it mean to love your neighbor? To speak out about an injustice? Thinking theologically, we might ask, "*How shall we live our lives now that we've seen what we've seen?*"

We all try to educate ourselves on the justice issues calling out- no, crying out- for our attention and work together to mitigate suffering where we encounter it. As you well know, none of our FCCOL ministries and partnerships unfold in isolation. It's all of *you* doing the heavy lifting and supporting the efforts of each and every partnership and ministry that makes our community so alive.

Which is why we pray each week "give **us** this day **our** daily bread". It's the "US" and the "OUR" that we try to live out.

I've invited two more of our volunteers from yesterday's journey to share their experiences of the Breakfast Run. Exhausted as I'm sure they are, I want to thank them and all our travelers for joining me in the pulpit today and taking the time to put their insights into words.

I also want to thank our other three parent drivers, Christine Bairos, Doug Kiem, and Becca Pepitone.

Speakers: Bill and Jody Belluzzi

Thanks Bill and Jody. What Bill and Jody didn't tell you is they also did a Costco Run and bought much of the food we brought to serve!

This spring while on sabbatical in Europe, I found myself having a day to myself while Paul met with a friend. After seeing the Mona Lisa at the Louvre Museum, I wandered through the sidewalks of Paris, eventually walking up the steep, stone steps in Montmartre, the artsy neighborhood overlooking metropolitan Paris.

As I climbed my way up and up, I saw "her", another more real and wizened Mona Lisa, on a street mural before me. It is the image on your bulletin cover today. Painted by the French artist, Swed Oner, I learned that Oner paints remarkable black and white portraits of ordinary people he's met on his travels around the world to Peru, Vietnam, Turkey, Algeria, Italy, Spain, and the US among other places. Often, his subjects, like the person I've named the "Mona Lisa", are homeless. Oner explains how he spends time in conversation getting to know his "muse" and seeks to put a spotlight on their anonymity- making them a somebody!

The artist deliberately tries to illuminate the dignity of the person he meets by painting them within a circle—to connote the circle of community “where everyone is equal”¹. All of Oner’s expressive frescoes are painted with this circle, or halo around them (my word); halos capture for me the holiness of each person, crowned as our psalmist of today notes, “just a little lower than God.” In my view, he captures this Mona Lisa’s *joie de vivre* and the theology of the circle, where no one is left on the margins. She reminds me of some of the guests we served yesterday.

Have you had a River Jordan moment recently?

As I watched our young people make another turkey sandwich yesterday, speak in Spanish to a shivering guest needing a coat or offering another cup of hot chocolate to a woman from Trinidad, I remembered the wise words of John O’Donohue that “to approach another person is an act of reverence and that requires preparation.”² Most of us cross paths with so many people in the course of our days that we can often forget that to truly meet another is a sacred act.

This Advent season beckons us to remember that the incarnation takes place anew each day, and that Christ comes in the form of those whom we meet on our path. Whether here in church or on a far away sidewalk.

On our way home from New York City, as we drove along the Merritt Parkway at twilight, we sang along to some tunes from *Frozen* and heard lots of Taylor Swift’s new album! We talked about what we’d witnessed and how it might have changed us.

It was a good day.

It was a holy day.

Wrote the author, Willa Cather,

That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.

¹ Swed Oner, <https://www.facebook.com/swed.fr/photos>.

² John O’Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*.