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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Isaiah 44: 9-18; Ephesians 2: 8-10, 13-15
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Standing on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$:
On Learning to Walk Through an Ancient Wall

This past summer, one of our guest preachers, Rev. Dr. Terrlyn Curry Avery spoke about an incident that occurred at the church she pastors in Springfield, Massachusetts, the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Presbyterian Church. On December 28, 2020, just a little more than two years ago, a call went out that the church was on fire. The fire department arrived and put out the blaze, but by then the flames had torn through the building, rendering it unusable. Arson was suspected, and within a few days a suspect had been found - a man from Maine with white supremacist tendencies who targeted the church because of its name.

Several people from this community had the opportunity to drive up to Springfield a few weeks ago to visit with members of the MLK Church. It felt important to meet them, and it also felt important to see with our own eyes the church that had been burned. We learned that reconstruction had begun, but from the outside, it bore all the visible scars of the fire. It shouldn't have been surprising, after all we have learned about the Deep North, but still, this wasn't Alabama in 1955. This was Massachusetts, in 2020. It's a sight I'll carry with me for some time to come.

What piqued my curiosity most, however, was how this incident fit into a much larger hemispheric, and really, global pattern, of persecuting and tormenting different forms of worship practiced by communities of African descent. It's something that I've actually been tracking for the past several years. Along with church burnings in the US, there have been outbreaks of violence against communities that practice African and African diasporic religions in Haiti, in Brazil, in Nigeria, Cameroon, and, in like manner, even in Australia, where Indigenous sites have been targeted for abuse.

An article in *The Washington Post* a few years back documented this pattern in Brazil. Over the past five years, a systematic campaign of abuse has been visited upon practitioners of Candomble and Umbanda throughout that country. These are traditions that were carried from Africa during the slave trade, traditions that were used to nourish and strengthen both individuals and entire communities through centuries of hardship. I've argued in the past that such traditions are the closest approximations of early Christianity, where small, largely underground communities practiced a misunderstood faith in the teeth of a very hostile empire. Ironically, these days, those waging the campaigns of intimidation are evangelical Christians.

Fueled by a deeply conservative and combative Protestant theology, churches have sent out armed gangs into the favelas, the poor neighborhoods in Brazil's cities. The gangs appear during ceremonies brandishing weapons, telling practitioners that they - the armed Pentecostals - are claiming the neighborhood for Jesus. They warn that should the Candomble or Umbanda members continue in their veneration, they'll burn the temple to the ground, or they'll ransack it. Indeed, there is documentation of dozens of temples and ceremonial sites throughout Brazil that have been burned, looted, or otherwise desecrated. So too, individual members have received death threats, and have been attacked and sometimes even stoned. Should you care to read more,

you can find further details in an article in the *Post* entitled “Soldiers of Jesus: Armed Neo-Pentecostals Torment Brazil’s Religious Minorities.”¹

Whether in the US or Haiti, in Brazil or West Africa, we need to understand that these are not isolated or disparate phenomena. They manifest in different ways, but they represent a centuries long campaign fueled, in large part (though by no means exclusively) by Protestant theology to demonize and to expel African and African diasporic forms of religious and cultural expression from neighborhoods and communities. (And by the way, it is largely a Protestant pattern, and not a Catholic one.) A spectrum of responses. Sometimes it takes violent forms. But as often as not, it manifests in softer, and subtler ways - in a drive toward conversion, say, or toward modernization. Even in progressive communities such as ours, with a commitment to religious pluralism, there is a way in which our vision, our ability to perceive these traditions as worthy of our interest, to say nothing of our care - there’s a way in which that ability has often been occluded and blocked. For years, popular representations have given these traditions the air of something occult, something dangerous. While we do have ways of incorporating Black Christianity into our understanding - the place that has sheltered many of the African traditions here in the United States - churches, especially predominantly white churches, have rarely interrogated their assumptions about other forms of African and African diasporic spirituality.

Questions arise: What is it about African forms of religion and culture that makes them seem so threatening, at least to some, so very upsetting, to the point that many people shaped by Protestant thought wish to erase it from their communities? Conversely, what is it within Protestant thought, writ large, that tempts so many people to dismiss the forms of wisdom and communal understanding that have emerged from Africa? Is there something within Protestantism itself, within the very structure of our theology, that is somehow resistant to these forms of ritual and cultural life? Armed neo-Pentecostals are an extreme expression of that resistance, but might there also be a set of intellectual and theological commitments that all of us who have been shaped by Protestant thought have inherited? Might there be something that we all need to interrogate if we are to model a different way of being? If so, what are those strains? And how might we overcome them, for the sake of a greater cosmopolitanism, for the sake of greater human understanding, for the sake of a generous and reconciling vision of the world?

Several years ago, during a visit to Haiti, I had the opportunity to spend a few days in a Vodou community in Port-au-Prince, observing some of the ceremonies at a local temple there. Prior to my arrival at that temple, I was speaking with a friend named Richard, who had grown up here in Connecticut, but who now lives in Haiti. He was raised as a Congregationalist, but as a young man, he began exploring his mother’s culture - she was Haitian. Speaking of the differences between Protestant culture and Haitian culture, and more generally, African diasporic cultures, he told me, “Look, you’ve got a 500 year old wall inside of you. You didn’t build that wall, but it is there. Protestantism was designed to be a kind of religious minimalism, where ornament, where emotion, and where bodily expression are all tightly contained and governed. Traditions like Vodou,” he told me, “are a kind of religious maximalism, where ornament is celebrated, where powerful emotions can sometimes sweep through, and where bodies are granted great expressiveness. I’m speaking generally,” he said, “but to the degree that you’ve been shaped by Protestant thought and theology, some version of that resistance is going to be living inside of you.”

I let that sink in for a while. It felt both uncomfortable, and true. Uncomfortable because I don’t wish to be governed by walls – whether those that exist in geographical space or the walls

¹ “Soldiers of Jesus,” by Terrence McCoy, published in the *Washington Post* on December 8, 2019.

that exist in my mind, and in my heart. But true because I recognized what he was talking about. A New England Meetinghouse is beautiful, but it is fairly minimalist in design. When we wish to enter the holy, we tend to remove the senses - we close our eyes when we pray, so as not to be distracted by our eyes. The apex of our service is the sermon, the moment in which we're asked to enter not our bodies, but our minds. I myself tend to live in my head. Ask me to interpret a text, and I can do it like nobody's business. Ask me to dance, to inhabit my body freely, especially in church, and well, I suddenly get shy. Those are all tiny ways that I recognized the wider truth of what my friend Richard was telling me.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that Richard is right. Let's say that there is a wall inside of us - one that will look slightly different for each of us depending on our background and cultural experience. But let's say that as Protestants, there is a kind of wall that prevents us from fully appreciating cultural expressions like those found in Haiti or Brazil, Nigeria or Benin. What are the elements that compose that wall? What's it made of? Those are questions I've been puzzling through for a while now, and while a full answer would require a book, I think it is possible to diagnose at least two segments of the wall.²

The first comes from the book of Ephesians, where the Apostle Paul, or whoever was writing in Paul's name, states that it is by grace that we have been saved, and that the law, the list of rituals, prescriptions, and prohibitions contained in the Hebrew Torah, has been abolished. Some parts of the New Testament say that the law has been abolished, while other parts say that Christ has fulfilled the law, which in practice amounts to much the same thing. That idea, abolishing or transcending the law, differentiated many early Christians from the Judaic tradition, but it was one of the primary points of emphasis for the Protestant Reformers as well. They used it as a means of asserting a direct connection with the Divine, without any need for mediating structures like priests, or religious rituals. It's a lovely idea, one that we've been shaped by - humans are reconciled with God not by adherence to laws, or religious structures, but by grace. I have no wish to argue otherwise.

But I do wish to note an unfortunate outgrowth of that idea. For generations, that notion of abolishing the law has been a cudgel used against those who do organize their lives according to explicitly articulated rituals and legal codes. It's why, for example, Protestants rarely read Leviticus or Deuteronomy. Biblical criticism was shaped by Protestantism throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and many critics learned to dismiss the books of the law, with all of their rituals, as somehow primitive, belonging to an era prior to the dispensation of grace. That was the basic assumption governing both anti-semitic and anti-Catholic sentiments within Protestant thought. To this way of thinking, all those rituals, all those laws, somehow bespeak a willful primitivism that many Protestants believed they had transcended. Indeed, for them, progress entailed that others must transcend those ritual and legal strains as well.

² An obvious segment of the wall is found in the prohibition against the worship of other gods found in the Hebrew Bible. Though even the commandment found in Exodus 20: 2 - Thou shalt have no other gods before me - assumes the existence of other deities. While the question of polytheism vs. monotheism is a far larger topic than I can cover here, it's worth noting that European cultures haven't, historically, had trouble incorporating the polytheism of Greece or Rome into their understanding of the world. *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, and *The Aeneid*, all of which rely upon a polytheistic view of the world, have never been the cause of scandal, even in Protestant cultures - at least to my knowledge. To wit, Middle School children read about the polytheistic world of Greece in the *Percy Jackson* series all the time, and it hasn't troubled any of the school boards I'm aware of. And so while I'm sure the prohibition against the worship of other gods is a part of the wall, I'm not at all confident that polytheism, per se, is what is at issue in the Protestant resistance to African and African diasporic religious expressions.

That is, in a nutshell, precisely how Protestants have encountered African and Indigenous rituals as well – as a primitive throwback to an era of ritual and law, prior to the dispensation of grace. So here, treatment of African traditions is deeply intertwined with the ways Protestantism has historically positioned itself in relation to both Judaism and Catholicism. A healthy antidote for Protestants, then, would be a wholesale reexamination of its relationship to both ritual and the law, starting with a reappraisal of sections of the Bible like Leviticus. Though it's been suppressed in our tradition, that's actually one of the openings toward African and Indigenous understandings. It's one of the places to begin.

The second segment of the wall is attached to the first. Because there is no longer a need for mediation from rituals or the law, because in Christ humans have direct access to God, that not only means that laws and rituals belong to an earlier epoch. It also means that any mediating images do as well. Some early Protestants seized upon passages such as the one we encountered from Isaiah, which mocks what it understands to be idols. The so called idols are really just images meant to mediate between humans and the Divine, to give assistance in the act of human imagination. That strain of thought, borrowed from parts of the Hebrew Bible, resulted in severe outbursts of iconoclasm within early Protestantism, where Catholic icons were smashed and the stained glass windows of many cathedrals were broken. That's the same governing impulse behind the absence of images and icons in our own worship space, and indeed, in most Protestant worship spaces. If you have direct access to the Divine, not only are those mediating images unnecessary. They might actually confuse and distract you from the worship of the true God, who cannot, in this line of thinking, be represented by an image.

Once again, that impulse toward the prohibition of images, was precisely how Protestants encountered the African and also other Indigenous traditions as well. The images - designated as idols, or fetishes - became another sign of primitivism, of a faith that willfully remained immature, or intellectually undeveloped. The images - representations in painting or statuary - were understood to be pre-literate, crutches for those who had not been inducted into the higher arts of the word. In this line of thinking, literacy was understood to be a way of moving individuals, and whole cultures, higher on the so-called ladder of civilization, from the contemplation of images to the abstractions of reason, reading, and the word itself, the logos. In that regard, a healthy antidote for Protestants would be to learn to incorporate more of the senses, and not only the auditory, into our understanding of the Divine. We need images, smells, movements, all of it. That may not sound like much, but it's actually a way of rewiring our theological framework.

Let me return to that conversation in Haiti. After he had described the great Protestant wall to me, I asked Richard how one goes about transcending such a structure. He smiled knowingly. "You can't," he said. "You can't dismantle the wall. You won't live long enough to tunnel under it, and to climb above it." Then he paused, and his eyes twinkled. "You know what it's like? It's like those kids in the Harry Potter movies. You know how they're trying to find Platform 9 ¾, which is the portal into that different realm where Hogwarts exists? The only way they can get there is to run through the wall. Sometimes it blocks them. But sometimes, when they run towards the wall, the bricks vanish, and suddenly they're standing in another realm. That's what it's like with these traditions if you've been shaped by Protestant thought – and the vast majority of people in North America have been shaped by that thought, whether they know it or not. You've got to run toward the wall, and you may just run through it to the other side."

Whether running, walking, or just passing a hand through the bricks, I believe it's urgently necessary to move through the wall. It's necessary because of the ways that wall has

supported structures of white supremacy, to say nothing of other forms of cultural chauvinism. It's necessary because of the legacy that traditions such as ours have, historically, bequeathed to the world. And it's necessary because we have the capacity, and the responsibility, to model an entirely different form of Protestantism, one that is open to, and embracing of, these beautiful and vibrant African traditions.

Later this year, we're going to have an opportunity to pass through the wall. Or at least, to begin the process of moving through it. From December 29th of 2023, to January 11th of 2024, there is an opportunity for a small contingent of visitors from FCCOL to travel to West Africa. We'll be flying into Ghana, where we'll visit the Elmina and Cape Coast fortresses, where so many enslaved people were transported to the Americas. We'll need to grapple with the painful history of West Africa. But we're going to do far more than that. Rather than remaining in the past – necessary though it is to confront that past – I believe it's far more important to recognize the contemporary vitality of traditions that continue to be practiced in Africa, traditions that have shaped the Americas. That's why we'll be visiting with, and learning about the Ashanti people, one of the great civilizations of West Africa which still flourishes today. We'll cross into Togo, visiting other villages and communities where traditional rituals are practiced. And we'll finish in Benin, where we'll get to experience Benin's International Vodun Festival, a celebration of a faith of world historical significance that has helped to shape the Americas. In less than a year, we'll have the opportunity to walk through a wall. If you'd like to be a part of that sacred pilgrimage, let me know.

I began by citing examples of churches, temples and shrines that have been burned. That's something that has happened to this community as well, though for very different reasons. With that in mind, I'll close by reading Marilyn Nelson's poem about the 1907 burning of our Meetinghouse. That event is something that can help us to connect with communities that have experienced similar tragedies. Only now, with apologies to Marilyn, I'll widen the focus so as to encompass not only a burned church, but other gathering spaces for the sacred as well. Here is "Church Burner."

Someone carried the secret to the grave
 Of who started a fire in the pulpit
 That night and why. But just before midnight,
 John Sterling, returning to his stables,
 Saw red sky and woke the sleeping town.
 As the clock in the belfry counted twelve,
 Flame swallowed the walls and the steeple
 And spat live seeds of fire into the sky.
 Despite the buckets splashed from hand to hand
 And into the ravenous maw of flame,
 It was hopeless. The bell rang one last time
 When the steeple collapsed. The meeting house
 Was burned to a smolder. But not the church.

Churches don't burn, temples don't burn, the holy does not burn,
 though an edifice might.
 An arsonist torches a building.
 But a set of ritual practices constitutes a way of life,

and that is something arson can't destroy.
A church, a house temple, a sacred grove is not, finally, a where; it is a when.
It's when we gather to invite awe,
When we strip our assumptions down to their essence,
When we struggle to see beyond surfaces
To the bedrock of striving to understand.
When ethics are not understood to be written in stone,
But are choices, written with a stick in dust.

Bound by such a history with all who have faced the flames, who practice faith from the furnace of history, what choices will we make? What will we, the FCCOL community, come to inscribe in the dust of our time?