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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Luke 19:28-40
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Sheltering Love

Last Saturday, we arrived at the theater a little wet and chilled.

Our church youth group had taken the train into Manhattan to see the premiere of a new play from the UK called, simply, *Love*.

The renovated Armory where the drama was performed, is a cavernous space in which to see this play, set in a homeless shelter a few days before Christmas.

Our seats were positioned on the side of the stage right behind the makeshift kitchen counter and microwave where a family heated up one can of tomato soup for their family of four. It felt like we were eavesdropping on the most intimate moments of stress and pain and even joy. Our 8th grade students shifted in their seats as a dad made toast for his two children and pregnant wife.

A single woman from Sudan washed dishes.

Two children wearing school uniforms left for school.

One of the main characters was pregnant. You felt her fear that she'd be stuck having her baby in that shelter having been evicted the week before.¹ (1,000 babies were born in NYC shelters last year)

When she learns an older man and his ailing mother have been living out of one room (next to her family's) for over a year, one begins to feel not only her dread for what could happen to her fragile family, but one's own claustrophobia bubbling up.

Everyone here is living in a state of limbo.

Two people who are refugees wander back and forth into the public space. At one point they discover they both speak Arabic and they relax into an animated conversation for a while before going back into their separate lonely rooms never to be seen again.

Someone bangs on the door, desperate to get into the one overused bathroom.

Privacy is a privilege of the housed.

In between each scene, the lights in the theater space go completely dark -the kind of dark where you can't see your hand in front of your face- the kind of dark that feels like Good Friday.

Before the lights come back on, there's a cacophony of sound, a rushing train gets louder. You, too, feel like you're deep underground.

Painfully slow in its pace, the story unfolds over the course of several days leading up to Christmas. Time drags when you've no place else to go.

Based on 1st person interviews with unhoused individuals and families, the playwright, Alexander Zeldin, described the weaving together of the intimate stories of people hovering on the fringes of society; Those waiting for the shower to be available, waiting for a call from the social worker, waiting for the job bank to open, waiting for the check from the aid office to clear. Waiting for signs of hope.

What softens the despair are the small acts of love, deeds of kindness and humanness that turn the shelter into a landscape of love, a grown man washing his mother's hair in the

¹ Matthew Desmond, *Poverty, By America*. (2023).

community sink with such tenderness, tears fell down his wet cheeks- and mine.

A family hanging together as best they can, remembering to tell each other "thank you" and "I love you" even as there is not enough rice to bring to the dinner table.

One stranger apologizing to another for pocketing her treasured red mug, a child's Christmas carol, is sung with such abandon warming up the dimly lit living space.

This is a gospel drama.

Not unlike the one volunteers and guests experience at our Saturday morning Food Pantry... where yesterday 89 people were served.

It is a gospel drama unfolding in waves of kindness as guests line up for dinner at the New London Community Meal Center where the Deacons served last Sunday night. It is a gospel drama unfolding as a friend attends a local Board of Finance meeting speaking up for more funding for students and less funding for guns.

It is a gospel drama on Palm Sunday that starts off the week called HOLY, too. Many in the crowd followed Jesus on that festival day, on his way to Passover in a city filled with turmoil. Many have already witnessed him healing the ones who are blind, welcoming the odd strangers, offering compassion to the walking wounded, raising the lost or destigmatizing the one leveled by stereotype.

Jesus' declaration to love your neighbor as yourself continued on full display.

Just before Jesus entered the gates of Jerusalem on that fateful morning, they watched him lift up and call the invisible ones by name. The threat of his presence and power to transform lives grew by the day until it culminated at the feet of the disciples and then, the feet of the empire.

Soon enough, a parade of palms and Hosannas will give way to the Passion narratives and shouts of "Crucify Him!"(Luke 23.21). The stones too, will shout and give way to his heavy footprints.

How might we enter into these "storied gates" of Holy Week?

This year, as a church we'll mark Maundy Thursday and share a Communion meal in memory of the one Jesus offered with the disciples in the upper room at the Last Supper. After that, the drama will intensify as we enter into the deep gates of hell (or as Steve says, "*Hell, yes!*") with the inaugural reading of Dante's *Inferno*. Steve in the newsletter has reminded us that this stirring epic actually begins on Maundy Thursday. Will we make it through to Easter, to the resurrection life of new beginnings and second chances promised for all?

Like the play, *Love*, our Youth group and friends saw, we are invited to ride through those ancient stone gates of this week with some guides and questions along the way.

Writes the scholar, Amy Jill-Levine, "Jesus is about to give up his life, which requires determining what a life is worth. And that means we all have to determine what our own lives are worth. What are the lives worth of our migrant neighbors, the unsheltered family pushing their cart into our fellowship hall...?"

"What is worth dying for? What is worth living for? What are our values, and have we lived up to them?"²

Holy Week is a time to think about risk, because that's what this whole Passion narrative -and the life and ministry of Jesus -represents-the risk of love and where it beckons us. As a people of faith and courage, hope.

Can we take the time this week for introspection and reflection as we enter in deeply to the stories, the imagery, the drama and walk alongside the living stones before us.

² Amy Jill-Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week*.(2018)

They are our stories as well.

I thought of that as our youth group reassembled after the show under the LOVE sign in front of the theater. As we made our way back to Grand Central Station, we passed many more people on the street and subway carrying too many bags and asking for change. Were these folks more visible to us after seeing the show?

That's what art does at its core, open us up, peels off the cloaking layers to the quickening of the human heart and what Love asks of us....

Writes James Baldwin, "*The artist, then, illuminates that darkness, blazes roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.*"

In a moment we're going to step into the story ourselves as our children did before us today. We'll wave our palms outside in a circle on the front lawn and shout our loud Hosannas!

What in us is crying out for justice?

What in us refuses to be silent?

For whom and what shall we raise our palms today?

Notes: Something like 70,000 a night sleep in the city's municipal shelters. And last year over 1,000 babies were born in them. These numbers in New York are staggering but of course, we know our numbers in CT too, are rising. Just this week, there were headlines about how homelessness in CT has increased by 13% for the first time in a decade.

In his new book, *Poverty, By America*, Pulitzer Prize winning author, Matthew Desmond, examines the reasons why poverty rates in this country have changed little in the past 50 years. The persistence of the problem he surmises has something to do with the will of the privileged, the will of the landlords, the will of the mortgage lenders and corporate ...as Desmond writes, "we typically don't talk about poverty as a condition that benefits some of us."

He calls for an end to Poverty by having his readers us become poverty abolitionists ...Where "we" oppose racism, and opportunity hoarding in our communities, and stand for shared prosperity. Poverty abolitionists are solutionists, doers, ...

Living our daily lives in ways that express solidarity with the poor could mean we pay more; anti-exploitative investing could dampen our stock portfolios. By acknowledging those costs, we acknowledge our complicity. Unwinding ourselves from our neighbors' deprivation and refusing to live as enemies of the poor will require us to pay a price. It's the price of our restored humanity and renewed country.

Amy Jill Levine introspection. Jesus is about to give up his life, which requires determining what a life is worth. And that means we all have to determine what our own lives are worth. What is worth dying for? What is worth living for? What are our values, and have we lived up to them?

During Lent, we should ask ourselves, what should I have done that I did not do? What risk should I have taken that I was afraid to take? When did my sense of self-preservation trump my sense of courage?

Holy Week is a time to think about risk, because that's what this whole Passion narrative represents-and perhaps, Dante's epic poem. And the Play about love.

We watch those around Jesus—his disciples, his friends, his companions who have been with him since those early days of the ministry in Galilee. These are the companions who watched him heal the sick, feed the multitudes, and proclaim the good news. Yet we see them

now, in that fateful last week, betraying him, denying him, running away from him.

These are stories not only of Judas and Peter, of John and James; they are our stories as well.

Walking into the Park Avenue Armory in New York City is in the center of this picture Jesus rides on a donkey, holy and humble. Light shines around him in a gateway to a city. He is flanked by crowds and there are angels overhead, with the heavens above them all. The picture as a whole is made up of disparate elements, together giving the picture the feel of a 'retablo' or shrine.

The picture is *Guatemala: Procession* (1978) by Betty LaDuke (1933-), where the artist imagines Christ entering a Mayan community. About the inspiration for the picture Betty LaDuke writes:

“Before Christmas, at the Mayan village of Chichicastenango in Guatemala, statues of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints are . . . carried aloft in an annual procession. In my painting *Guatemala: Procession*, Christ appears on a donkey surrounded by the masks worn by the Mayans who dance to honour and celebrate their indigenous roots. They also dance a re-enactment of the brutal Spanish invasion, with satirical masks representing conquistadores. Inside the church many candles are lit and prayers are offered.”

On Palm Sunday Jesus rode into Jerusalem. This picture encourages imagining him entering every city, coming in compassion for all in every place.

Blessing of Palms

This blessing
can be heard coming
from a long way off.

This blessing
is making
its steady way
up the road
toward you.
This blessing
blooms in the throats
of women,
springs from the hearts
of men,
tumbles out of the mouths
of children.

This blessing
is stitched into
the seams
of the cloaks
that line the road,
etched into
the branches
that trace the path,

echoes in
 the breathing
 of the willing colt,
 the click
 of the donkey's hoof
 against the stones.

Something is rising
 beneath this blessing.
 Something will try
 to drown it out.

But this blessing
 cannot be turned back,
 cannot be made
 to still its voice,
 cannot cease
 to sing its praise
 of the One who comes
 along the way
 it makes.

Jan Richardson *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*

I know one of the concerns of the children's music ministry is that the children understand what they are singing and that they mean it. And I share that concern for our people. In a moment the choir will sing a song called, "Hosanna, Hosanna!" And after that we all will sing a song which begins: "Hosanna in the highest!" So I want to give a little lesson in Greek and Hebrew, to make sure we all know what the New Testament means when it says in three different places, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (Matthew 21:9,15); or, "Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:9,10); or simply, "Hosanna!" (John 12:13).

A Persistent Problem: Over the past 50 years, there has been no real progress on how to address poverty in the United States. A Pulitzer Prize-winning sociologist offers a new explanation for an intractable problem.³

Desmond Rising rents are not simply a reflection of rising operating costs. There's another dynamic at work, one that has to do with the fact that poor people — and particularly poor Black families — don't have much choice when it comes to where they can live. Because of that, landlords can overcharge them, and they do.

Yet where else can poor families live? They are shut out of homeownership because banks are disinclined to issue small-dollar mortgages, and they are also shut out of public housing, which now has waiting lists that stretch on for years and even decades. Struggling families looking for a safe, affordable place to live in America usually have but one choice: to rent from private landlords and fork over at least half their income to rent and utilities. If millions of poor renters accept this state of affairs, it's not because they can't afford better alternatives;

³ https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/09/magazine/poverty-by-america-matthew-desmond.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=style-poverty&variant=show®ion=MAIN_CONTENT_1&block=storyline_top_links_recirc

it's because they often aren't offered any.

"Predatory inclusion" is what the historian Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor calls it in her book "Race for Profit," describing the longstanding American tradition of incorporating marginalized people into housing and financial schemes through bad deals when they are denied good ones. The exclusion of poor people from traditional banking and credit systems has forced them to find alternative ways to cash checks and secure loans, which has led to a normalization of their exploitation.

Poverty isn't simply the condition of not having enough money. It's the condition of not having enough choice and being taken advantage of because of that. When we ignore the role that exploitation plays in trapping people in poverty, we end up designing policy that is weak at best and ineffective at worst.

We must also expand the housing options for low-income families. There isn't a single right way to do this, but there is clearly a wrong way: the way we're doing it now. One straightforward approach is to strengthen our commitment to the housing programs we already have. Public housing provides affordable homes to millions of Americans, but it's drastically underfunded relative to the need.

A Sharp Drop in Child Poverty: With little notice and accelerating speed, America's children have become much less poor. An expanded government safety net has played a critical role.⁴

Living our daily lives in ways that express solidarity with the poor could mean we pay more; anti-exploitative investing could dampen our stock portfolios. By acknowledging those costs, we acknowledge our complicity. Unwinding ourselves from our neighbors' deprivation and refusing to live as enemies of the poor will require us to pay a price. It's the price of our restored humanity and renewed country.

⁴ https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/12/us/politics/child-poverty-families-west-virginia.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=styln-poverty&variant=show®ion=MAIN_CONTENT_1&block=storyline_top_links_recirc