

Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: John 14: 1-2; Ephesians 1: 15-18
May 14, 2023

Seeing With the Eyes of the Heart

Last week when those considering membership in this community were sitting and talking with one another, I was asked a question that, in truth, I've never been asked in one of those gatherings. "Why did you choose to come to Old Lyme," I was asked, which, I think, was a way of asking, "Why did you yourself choose to become a member here?" There were, there are, a lot of reasons I could cite, but the one that came to the forefront of my mind was this: the astonishing and unexpected global imagination of this place.

You see, when I was first getting to know FCCOL, I sensed something here that far surpassed anything I had witnessed in a church community before, or since. Yes, there was the vibrant and engaged sense of worship and music - that's crucially important to a healthy church community - but there are a lot of places that do that well. There was the evident camaraderie, the affection among all of you who have come to know and trust one another here. That too is vitally important, but it's also not unusual. There was the local outreach, there was the White Elephant Sale, there was a dynamic program for young people, and while each of those things is powerfully necessary for the functioning of a dynamic faith community, most every church I have ever known does precisely those things. They each do them to the best of their ability, which is to say, sometimes better and sometimes worse, but it's none of it unusual. What made me sit up a little straighter when I was first getting to know this place, what made me say, wait, tell me more, was the record of global partnerships this community had engaged in. The Cheyenne River Reservation, South Africa, Palestine and Israel, and Haiti, and the deep level of involvement with communities in each of those sites - that's what helped me to see that there was something different about this place.

Let me be a little more specific about what I sensed in those partnerships, because in some ways, even that isn't especially unique. Other churches too have projects in other parts of the world. In fact, that's as common in North American churches as hymns, pews, and potlucks. I've often said that if poor or deprived communities around the world didn't exist, North American churches would invent them, so that they'd have a place to enact their benevolence, their good intentions. A radical priest and social theorist named Ivan Ilich (who by the way, lived much of his life in Cuernavaca, Mexico, another place we've been privileged to be in relationship with) once addressed a group of young people who had come to Latin America during a summer break in order to, as they saw it, "help." They were there to build things, to teach things, to paint things, to distribute things - to do the kinds of things that churches like to do when they go to other parts of the world. Ivan Ilich shocked that group of young idealists by delivering to them a talk entitled "To Hell With Your Good Intentions." It's a speech that our Boards - all of them - probably ought to read together every year or two. Ilich argued that the good intentions of North American Christians and idealists were stripping communities throughout Latin America, and indeed, throughout much of the world, of their own autonomy and agency. He charged that the good intentions of North American churches were creating a sense of dependency. And he charged that those good intentions were actually serving as an unwitting advertisement for a lifestyle of consumer capitalism, as all of the Latin American

communities in which those church groups descended came to desire what the North Americans already had. And so to hell with your good intentions, Ilich told all those idealistic volunteers. Please, if that's what you've come to offer us, he said, go home, and stay there.

At the end of his talk, however, he shifted. We're not objects upon which you can practice your own sense of righteousness, on which you can enact your own sense of goodness, Ilich said. But we are people. And we do wish to be in relationship. And there is value in learning from one another's respective cultures, of being shaped and informed by the practices of those with different perspectives on the world. And so please, if you wish to be here, come and be in relationship with us. Learn from us, as we will learn from you. But we do not wish to be objects of your charity, or of your pity, or of your piety.

What distinguished this congregation for me was that it had thought carefully about such things. What distinguished this congregation, in my mind, was that it had sought to transcend the charity model, the helping model, of missions, moving toward a sense of mutuality and partnership, one that was fitting for the complex and pluralistic world that we live in. What distinguished this congregation was its willingness to sense not only the needs of other people - of those who are not "us" in other words, but to sense its own spiritual needs as well; the need to be enlarged, the need to be in relationship, the need to be called forth from the ways North American culture, New England culture, and yes, Old Lyme culture, so often traps and isolates us. To top it off, what distinguished this congregation was its willingness to learn from and to incorporate other habits of being into itself - those practices, rituals, and beliefs other than Protestant Christianity that have shaped the modern world, and in so doing, to move from a charity model of ministry to a justice model of ministry. Through David Good's leadership, through Carleen's leadership, and through the deep soul work that so many people within this congregation engaged in over the years, FCCOL managed to transcend many of the pitfalls that have afflicted North American churches, while building a vital set of relationships that few congregations have managed to maintain.

In your pews, there exists a little booklet that Carleen has worked on detailing our many mission partnerships over the years. I'd like you to take that out, and have a look at it. And while you do, Carleen is going to share just a few stories about the early years of those long-term relationships.

(Carleen)

The journey that has given birth to the breadth of our mission work began inauspiciously at a monthly Board of Missions meeting, 40 years ago. At that time, the people serving on that board were talking about how much better mission giving would be if we could put a "face" on those we seek to help. And one of the members of that board, Ramona McNamara, who had been born and brought up in South Dakota, said that the Native Americans where she came from seemed to get very little national attention; relegated as they were to reservations on large tracts of lands distant from most tourist routes.

And so, from that seemingly little seed of an idea, our journey into partnerships and mission engagement and intentional dialogue with other cultures and other faith traditions began. From the seed of an idea, a broad tree with many branches has grown and flourished and blessed three generations of families of this church community.

But- back to the beginning...Forty years ago, through our national denomination, The United Church of Christ, we learned of a small South Dakota community called "Green Grass" that could use our friendship and our help. "Green Grass" is a community of probably only a few

hundred people, set toward the eastern side of the sprawling Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation – a reservation the size of the state of Connecticut. The reservation sees very little tourist traffic, has no casino, and no thriving industry to provide any kind of economic stability.

The land is staggeringly beautiful, marked by rolling hills, and the gentle Moreau River that etches a ravine through sand banks in which you can find a treasure trove of ancient, small, fossilized remnants of sea-life. You'll find treasured rocks with their fossilized skeletons in the households of many of the over 300 people who have made the journey to Green Grass over these past decades.

Bold thunder and lightning storms roll across the prairie in summer; winters can be harsh with cold winds that drive the snow. It's a land of big sky and bold weather.

What we have found, and what we have learned, over these many years visiting the Green Grass community has been enriching far beyond what we could at first have imagined. Almost every year – with the exception of these past years of the COVID pandemic – groups from this church have journeyed out to South Dakota for a week- usually in early summer, but once even amidst the harshness of winter.

Our first visit, in the summer of 1985, opened our eyes – the eyes the letter to the Ephesians refers to as “the eyes of our hearts.” We found a people burdened by unrelenting poverty, but with an admirable nobility of bearing, and with a deep sense of the power of their heritage. Together with those new friends, we found we were standing on “holy ground.”

As you may know, the “resettlement” of native peoples onto reservations, like the Lakota some 150 years ago, cost them dearly. Culturally.... geographically.... spiritually.... societally. They were people “of the land” – like the Nehantics we met with two weeks ago. The Nehantics, essentially nomadic, moved from the shores of Long Island Sound where they could fish and live off the bounty of the water by summer, to the inner hills around north Lyme and Salem for their winter encampments. The Lakota moved from the Dakota plains where, by summer, they could hunt for buffalo and eat the prairie wild fruits, to the Black Hills for winter, to escape the harsh prairie blizzards.

Having settled the native people on “reserved” land, cutting off the life-blood of their pattern of moving camp, the dominant culture then proceeded to try to eradicate what it perceived to be the indigenous practices that formed their cultural and spiritual identity. Their language – their ritual dances and ceremonies – their social gatherings called forth by the drums and chants of their music. In the case of the Nehantic people, colonial leaders summarily declared them “extinct.” (In truth, they had dispersed out of necessity.)

Roughly one hundred years after the founding of the Cheyenne River Reservation, our little “tribe” of adventurous pilgrims from Old Lyme Connecticut arrived at the Green Grass community. We numbered about 20 intrepid souls.

What the United Church of Christ had suggested we help them with was the moving of an old church building from one nearby settlement into the heart of the Green Grass Community. Why did they need our help? Because, on their own, they were unable to borrow the money to finance the move. You see the Lakota have no proof of land ownership; no deed or title to specific land. In the purest sense they don't believe ANYONE **owns** land- we borrow it from the generations yet to follow us. But if you try to borrow money to put a structure on land that you can't prove you own – well, the bank is not going to comply.

Our Board of Trustees (our church - you and I) financed the moving of that church building.

What grew out of the first journey to the Green Grass community has been a friendship – a mutually enriching dialogue – that has lasted for very nearly 40 years. For the first number of

years we shared in the life of their little church, worshipping with them every time we were there. There were elders who, having been “converted” to Christianity over the years, welcomed us, I think primarily, as fellow Christians.

But over time we entered into conversations with many of the Native Americans who spoke passionately about the importance of reclaiming their former spiritual practices and traditions that, they believed, would help reclaim the spiritual and physical health they deeply needed. And, over time, we were invited to take part in some of the rituals and practices of their traditional sacred ceremonies. The scared sweat lodge ritual, the hauntingly beautiful Sun Dance ritual, the humbling and moving Vision Quest, and the beautiful, solemn tradition of tying little “prayer bundles” of sweet grass wrapped in colorful cloth on the trees that line the pathways to the top of some of their sacred Butte’s: a practice that symbolizes prayers as resilient and enduring, carried near and far by the wind.

Those experiences that we have shared with them – those times that we were invited to stand on the “holy ground” of their sacred practices have been deeply enriching for us.

In the interest of time, I’d like to tell you one story -about the first experience of a sacred sweat lodge ceremony that I was privileged to take part in, very early in our partnership journey.

Together with a few other members of the church, I had been a part of a conference in the Black Hills in 1987 – a conference designed to try to lessen the distrust and enmity that existed between the predominantly white landowners of South Dakota and the Native Americans of the region; mostly as a result of a recent attempt to honor the native lives lost at the battle of Wounded Knee.

We were told that one of the elders of the Lakota people was offering a sweat lodge to a limited number of the “white” conference participants. But he wanted to be absolutely sure that anyone who took part in this sacred ritual was sincerely invested in the experience – not simply a voyeur. He would need to meet with prospective participants ahead of time. I didn’t know very much about what a sweat lodge really was – but I understood it to be a healing and strengthening ritual, essential to Lakota practice. I made the decision to meet with him to be “interviewed.”

As you might guess, I prepared carefully for my meeting with the elder. I told him the previous year had been very hard. My mother had died, fairly young, after a long and difficult battle with cancer. And that death sent ripples of sadness through my young family. All of which I spoke about.... And he listened. And then there was long, long, long silence while he pondered. Then... very gently he said, “I think maybe you need a psychiatrist.”

I did take part in that sweat lodge – and the depth and magnitude of that experience remains clear in my mind to this day. The elder explained to me that, for Native Americans, the sweat lodge ceremony was very much like Holy Communion in the Christian tradition. You ingest the spirit of Christ as substance, as bread and wine, he explained. The hot steam inside our sweat lodge becomes the presence of the Great Spirit, for us. You will breathe in that Great Spirit and it will permeate your body – and you will be cleansed and healed as the spirit moves in and through your body and out every pore of your being.

Participants met at midnight under a star-studded sky. We crawled on our hands and knees, to sit in a circle around a large cluster of red-hot rocks, in the shelter of a low, canvas dome. The steady rhythm of the drums, the songs sung by the elders in their native tongue, the pouring of cups of water over the rocks to produce steam so thick it felt like trying to breathe under water.... the smell of the stalk of sweet grass through which I was told to breathe, the intense heat.... somehow everything I experienced that night led me into a far deeper understanding of what it means to experience the indwelling Spirit of God. I believe – I think I have always,

essentially believed - that God's spirit exists within and beneath and around us ALL – all of the time. But to be made aware of the power of that Spirit so viscerally and powerfully was the great gift that was given to me that night.

Native Americans of many tribal traditions celebrate the sweat lodge ceremony as a way of calling forth the strength they need to live “strong” in a challenging world. In indigenous practice it could be thought of as worship – or as communion – as a ritual of healing – as a way of entering into the spiritual world.

By the term “Indigenous religions” we mean religions – spiritualities – that grew out of the practices and beliefs of native peoples *before* a formal or systematic religion practice was introduced from “outside.” Indigenous religious traditions are deeply rooted in the belief that there is a holistic interrelation of everything that is with everything that is; recognizing the *sacred* in all things. The practices and rituals of indigenous religions are passed down from generation to generation, mostly through the oral tradition. The term UBUNTU which you've heard me use before- comes to us from the traditional ZULU spirituality – and means that *we need each other in order to become fully human.*

I believe the indigenous traditions help us to understand that we are made to live in a delicate network of interdependence with one another, with God, with the natural world, and with the rest of God's creation. In the recovering of ancient understandings, we just might find the new wisdoms we need to be healers in a world as divided as the world we live in today.

The mission booklet you were given today, as you came into church, is our best attempt to sketch the breadth of our mission outreach and engagements. As you'll see, there are countless ways we seek to put a “face” on our mission work. The work of serving in soup kitchens, stocking the shelves of the food pantry, volunteering at the Homeless Hospitality Center, harvesting vegetables at FRESH NEW LONDON – and more: these are all ways to be engaged alongside those we seek to help. As is taking part in a partnership journey to deepen your understanding of the interdependence that just might be critical to building a more peaceful, more just world for the generations that follow us.

This is all leading to a new endeavor that I've been speaking about for some time now - a visit to West Africa - to Ghana, Togo, and Benin - scheduled to begin on December 29 of this year, and then continuing until January 11th of the new year. We'll be exploring the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in that region, but we'll also be learning about some of the Indigenous African Traditions that continue to be practiced in West Africa, traditions that, whether you know it or not, have shaped our lives in the Americas. Some of you, I know, have wondered, why that, and why now? And so I'd like to take a few moments to offer some background on it all, in addition, of course, to the background of cultural partnerships Carleen and I have already described.

I did my doctoral work in modern Christian thought - theology - but it was all situated within a religious studies environment. Religious studies simply has to do with becoming conversant with the traditions, the beliefs, and the rituals that are practiced by people around the world, both in a historical sense and in a contemporary sense. Religious studies is akin to the study of languages - as informed and engaged people living within the world, we believe that in order to inhabit the world fully, to say nothing of responsibly, we need exposure to traditions, to languages, other than our own. That's what helps to render people not strangers, not others, but neighbors and fellow travelers who are also seeking means of enlightenment. For those of us informed by such environments, the calling of religious studies is what can help to short circuit,

and to circumvent, the spasms of misunderstanding and abuse that we have seen erupt around Islam, and that sadly continues to erupt around Judaism, and a great many other living and vibrant traditions. And so I bring that fundamental commitment here, to my work as a minister. Universities provide that perspective to those young people who seek it out. But there are few other institutions in our world that provide such exposure, and teaching. I believe places of religious worship need to pick up the slack.

I will confess that one of the great blindspots in my own education over the years has been the African Indigenous Traditions, and indeed Indigenous traditions in general. Universities have taught those traditions, but until recently, they haven't been accorded the same status as the Monotheistic traditions, or some of the Eastern traditions. In like manner, we can say that some open minded people of faith have opened themselves to other practices - often a practice adjacent to Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, or, for those who share a contemplative perspective, like Buddhism. But a long history of racism and colonialism has too often rendered the practices of those in Africa, and those who belong to the African diaspora, as, at best, something not worthy of careful consideration, and at worst, as something to be feared, and then shunned. My own education testifies to the former of those.

All of that is changing. Beginning tomorrow, I'll be attending a conference at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music called Ritual Transformations of Consciousness, on the Sacred Arts of African Diasporic Religions. When I was a student at the ISM, it concentrated almost exclusively on church music, and especially on English church music. The ISM is doing some wonderful work in broadening itself, making itself a home for multiple expressions of the sacred, even as it retains its identity within a Christian divinity school. I love that about the ISM.

Churches need to be doing the same. And we especially need to be doing it with the African and African Diasporic Religious Traditions - those like Santeria, Vodou, Abakau, Palo, Candomble, and many others. Those traditions have shaped our music especially, but also our language and food, our modes of dress and bodily movements. They've shaped our patterns of ritual play - sports. In other words, we can't know who we are as Americans until we know how deeply we've been formed by those African and neo-African traditions.

But it's more than that. As we have all become concerned about how to overcome long term patterns of racism and white supremacy, we've been forced to ask what it is that has made the majority white culture of the United States so hostile to other forms of being, but especially to those forms of being that are African in origin. There are layers and nuances necessary for answering that question, and responding well to it. But surely one of the interventions we can make is to learn to appreciate, to understand, and hopefully to love, the traditions that have shaped and nourished people of African descent, both on the continent and throughout the Americas. Surely one of the most important pieces of our effort to overcome the long legacy of our colonial heritage is to allow ourselves to be informed by those practices, the way we have with our Lakota friends. That's more than most people want to do. If they want to do anything, they mostly wish simply to read a book, to have a discussion, and then hopefully to be done with it. But that's not the way of this congregation. You've been equipped and trained for a long time now to go deeper.

That's why I've been trying to introduce those traditions to our community over the past several years. And it's why we're taking this next step, to journey to West Africa later this year. Because of travel requirements, we can only take 15 people on this journey. We're filling those seats now, and so see me if you want to learn more. Even though the journey itself will be relatively small, my hope is that as a congregation, as a community, we might all come to

participate in aspects of it. There will be opportunities this fall for us all to explore the cultures and traditions that we'll be experiencing in readings and hopefully guest presentations. And so if you'd like to read along, or study along, as we all prepare to embark upon this journey with the reverence and care that it deserves, you would be most welcome. Additionally, if you're not traveling, but would like to help provide scholarship assistance for those who might otherwise not be able to do this journey, that too would be most welcome. But most of all, as we embark upon a new dimension in our shared lives together, one that it is both different, and yet very much in continuity with what we have been doing for years, I invite your curiosity, your openness, and your willingness to consider some things that may otherwise feel pretty far from your daily life. These traditions are not as far away as you may think they are. Even so, I invite your sense of the wideness of God's world, as we move deeper into a dimension of that world.

I'll close by referencing the words we heard earlier in the Letter to the Ephesians. We are doing our best to see with the eyes of our hearts, and to have our hearts enlightened and enlarged through relationships with other people. We seek to trust that the entire world is the house of God, and that in it, there are many mansions, many traditions, many practices, where the spirit of the holy can be found. It's that commitment, that ongoing search, that willingness to extend ourselves, that makes this community feel so precious, and so unique.