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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Psalm 145: 1-7; 2 Timothy 1: 3-7, 11-14
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In This House, On This Morning, or, Why Church Matters

To begin, here's a shout-out for all the folks who did Box Night last night. And it's a shout out for those who snuck over to the parsonage and who offered suggestions for the morning sermon. Are you ready for it? "Hold on to the memories. They will hold onto you!" (They told me I should include a Taylor Swift lyric, and so there it is, from the song New Year's Day.) But I actually hope you do hold onto the memories that you're building right now, including around here, and including last night!

Now for the rest of you. I'd like you to hear everything I have to say this morning as a riff, as a series of changes, like in a jazz ensemble, built around a singular theme, spoken in different ways, articulated with different rhythms, alternating between various instruments, but all of it organized around a singular thread, a singular passage. That thread has to do with the practice, and then with the transmission of faith across generations, a theme given powerful expression by the writer of 2 Timothy. "I am reminded of your sincere faith," the writer says, "a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice, and now I am sure lives in you." We're here to play the changes on that lovely biblical theme this morning.

I'd like to get the whole thing going by returning to what happened here two weeks ago. That's when we had our children and youth Sunday, which I thought was an awesome morning. I was moved at the enthusiasm of our young people, and by the dedication of all the Sunday School teachers and volunteers. I was moved by your support of what the kids were doing that morning, and I was moved by Gavin Lodge's final words to the whole Sunday School - that it can be a pretty lonely place out there, but that this church was a place that could provide a sense of care and belonging for them, the kids, but for all of us as well. I loved every bit of it. But maybe more than anything, I loved the moment when everyone gathered on the steps to sing those two songs. When that happened, I was suddenly transported back some thirty years, when I was singing in a church youth choir. And I was reminded of all the ways that participating in a faith community as a young person and as an adult, has shaped me - I think, I hope! - for the better.

If I could, I'd like to tell you a little bit about that time this morning, as a way of unpacking what I think is important about what we're doing week by week - here, now, in Old Lyme. When I was in junior high and high school, our family attended a Presbyterian church, in Middletown, Ohio, a struggling steel town outside of Cincinnati. In those years, there was still an economic base to that town, and while it was beginning to fray around the edges, it was a good place to be in those years. My dad was the music director at the church, and so there was never a question about whether I would be involved. It was simply expected. More to the point, it was expected that I would be a part of the youth choir. Even though I wouldn't have admitted it, I did sort of like it. My friends were there, and there was at least one girl, and sometimes more than one, that I had a crush on. I must tell you, sadly, that those crushes went totally unrequited. My theory is that it had something to do with fashion. You see, on the Sundays we sang, we all wore those colored robes and white pointy stoles that church choirs used to wear. Church choirs everywhere all used to wear them, and then suddenly, everyone everywhere

seemed to stop wearing them, just like that, as if all the Mainline denominations passed a joint resolution together about choir attire. I note that FCCOL got that memo!

Now, my romantic failures in the church choir may have had something to do with the robe, since no one can possibly look attractive in those things. But it may also have had something to do with my hair. I wore my hair short in the front and long in the back - yes, friends, when I was in high school I had a mullet. Since mullets are back in fashion among the fashionable set, I can at long last risk telling you about mine. The front looked not entirely unlike how my hair looks today. But the back, oh the back! First I let it grow over my collar. Then down past my shoulders. And then well below that too, to the point that my parents, who were quite indulgent, at one point said, very gently, "are you sure you don't want to trim that up a tiny bit?" I did not. Nor did one of my best friends, who was also a part of the youth choir. We wanted to look like the bands we saw on MTV - though, let me assure you, no one was fooled. And so, at least for me, the mullet remained well into my high school career. Unfortunately, the pictures hanging on my parents' wall in Tennessee testify to that truth. But they are forbidden to bring those pictures to their Niantic condo!

So one Sunday the youth choir sang, and we must have been a sight up there in our robes and our mullets. I happen to know we were, because someone wrote one of those anonymous poison pen notes that ministers, and I suppose, music directors, sometimes receive. The writer was upset about (and I quote) "the long haired hippies singing in the youth choir." When we learned of it, my friend and I were elated! We felt honored. In fact, if you're a would-be rebel in the church youth choir, it's the kind of validation you actually aspire to. My parents, and the ministers at the church, found it pretty amusing too. They congratulated us, and then they all shrugged, explained that this was the kind of thing that sometimes happened in churches, and then made sure we knew how glad they were that we were a part of the community - bad haircuts and all.

Despite that letter, that community was a place that I trusted. Even though my primary reason for being there was to be with friends, or to flirt, there were some deeper and more important things going on that I wasn't fully aware of - and here's where I hope all the folks who slept outdoors last night are listening. You see, church was a place in which I could let my guard down a little bit. It was a place in which I could test out some big questions. It was a place in which I could speak about, and think about, things that weren't being spoken about elsewhere. It was there that I heard people speak about what it might mean to believe that the entire world is structured by divine love. It was there that I was asked to consider what Jesus might have to do with my life, and to consider that prayer was something I might try for myself. It was there that I was encouraged to believe that an ancient tradition could be strong enough to support me through the hardest times. And it was there that I was encouraged to think that perhaps there was an ethical core to the world that made justice and equity things worth struggling for. There was nothing especially cool or hip about it - my own presence in a robe and mullet could testify to that - and I didn't perceive it at the time, but Sunday by Sunday, something was growing in me, something that eventually added up to a way of life that has been enormously life giving.

I continue to believe in the lessons I learned in that church as a young person, and I continue to believe that those lessons pertain to all of us here, no matter our age or background or theology or politics. Despite some of the trends we see around us - declining or closing churches, a diminished appreciation of religion and spirituality among those in my generation and younger, and the rise, among some, of a version of Christianity indistinguishable from nationalism - despite all of that, I continue to believe that what we do in this house on this

morning, as Wynton Marsalis once put it, matters for your life and for mine. I continue to believe that it matters for the life of the world. In the time that remains, I'd like to suggest several reasons that might be so - playing the changes, if you will, upon that theme announced in 2 Timothy, of faith being internalized, and then handed down from generation to generation.

Here's the first of my reasons: whether you know it or not, a deep formation is happening amidst all the repetitions we go through from Sunday to Sunday. I know, sometimes when we come here and sing the songs and offer the prayers and hear the old stories one more time, it may seem like nothing much is happening. It might even seem dull - though we do our best not to make it so! But something powerful is at work. Each Sunday is like the fragment of a puzzle, and we keep adding pieces that merge into a greater whole, one we often can't even see. Each Sunday is like a song that's taking shape one note at a time, so that it's hard to discern the melody, even if it is there. Or maybe it's like raising children, where each prepared meal, where each ride to school, where each hugged goodnight at the end of the day feels relatively unimportant when considered in isolation. But cumulatively, it's all a part of a vast, and vastly important project, which is the shaping and formation of a human life. That's what it is to practice the life of faith. That's what it is to do this Sunday by Sunday.

Friday was our daughter Sabina's 17th birthday, and I gave her a copy of one of my favorite novels of all time, John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Owen has the body the size of a five year old, but he has the strange wisdom and soul of a prophet. He believes he has been chosen by God to do something in particular, though he knows not what. I'll give nothing away about the plot, save to say that through some intuition, Owen is convinced that he must practice an elaborate basketball move that he calls The Shot. Over and over again, for years, he and a very patient friend practice The Shot, where a basketball is passed to Owen, who is then tossed into the air in order to dunk the ball. They don't know exactly why they practice The Shot. It's only in the novel's concluding moments that it becomes clear that in those ceaseless repetitions, none of which makes sense in isolation, Owen was preparing for something he could never have foreseen, an act of extraordinary heroism in which all those preparations suddenly converge.

It likely doesn't happen quite like that for us. But I have had moments, and maybe you have too, when all the ceaseless repetitions of life suddenly come together into a meaningful point. It might happen in a moment of illness or in a life crisis of some sort. It might happen when faced with a difficult task or when a conflict erupts. But suddenly, you realize that the words you need are there, the disposition you need is there, the wisdom and perspective you need is there. It's there because you've been preparing for it all along. That's when we come to understand what it is that we've been doing here week by week. This is the dress rehearsal for the performance called life.

Here's another reason that what we do is of consequence. It's best captured in an unlikely source, one that tends to make many in the United States very anxious. None other than Karl Marx wrote that, "Religion is the heart of a heartless world. It is the soul of soulless conditions." That line is one of the reasons that so many theologians have found him to be a fruitful conversation partner, from MLK, to Karl Barth, to Paul Tillich, and beyond. That phrase is a way of saying that amid the many cruelties and injustices that do take place in our world, the practice of religion is meant to serve as a softening of the heart. It's a way of saying that there actually is a way of conducting ourselves which is not about expediency, or profit, but that considers the human costs of various policy decisions. With immigration, housing, health care, taxation, social safety nets, and public violence, seemingly abstract decisions made in halls of power have real human consequences. As often as not, it's religious voices that seem to notice

those consequences, and to care. I'll give you one example related to what our middle school and high school kids did last night. Some twenty years ago, there wasn't an agency in New London that addressed the needs of the city's homeless population. It took a minister, shaped by the Gospel of Jesus, to discern that need, and to do something about it. Cathy Zall came out of this church, and she created the Homeless Hospitality Center to be a heart in what then felt like a heartless world. To all of our middle school and high school students who spent time considering homelessness last night, you were learning what it means to be that heart, and that is a beautiful, noble thing. We're proud of you for doing that. And so don't be afraid to be that same beating heart in other places in your life when things around you feel heartless. As often as not, when movements of social compassion and social justice get off the ground, it's because of something someone learned in a church.

I'll give you one last reason I think church matters and then I'll be quiet for another week. Last month, when Lisa Miller visited our adult forum, she spoke about the increase of mental health and addiction struggles across all age categories, but especially among young people. And she lamented that one of the ways human beings have traditionally confronted challenging life moments was through spiritual practices - through prayer, or contemplation, or the weekly practice of attending a service. The problem right now, she argued, is that even if adults of my generation and older have cultivated those practices for themselves - and that's a big if - we've grown shy about sharing those practices and beliefs. We've come to tell ourselves that our kids can and should make up their own minds about religion. We've become reluctant to emulate what we see, sometimes rightly, as intolerant or narrow minded practices among our fundamentalist and evangelical neighbors.

Meanwhile, because of our reluctance to speak about faith, we've wound up evacuating the public square of a more moderate or thoughtful religious voice. So too, we've failed to give our children and grandchildren a religious or spiritual language, a framework for navigating life's deepest questions. It's kind of like saying that because we want our kids to avoid plagiarism, we'll simply cease speaking around them, so that they can construct a language of their own. We know better. All language is inherited language. And I'm sorry, but all faith is inherited faith. Yes, we make it our own, the way we learn to shape language on our own to utter sentences of our own creation, but none of us invents a faith from whole cloth. It doesn't just materialize, as if by magic. No, like in 2 Timothy, a parent or grandparent or someone else shares something about their own faith and it captures us. A youth choir, a liturgy, a repeated hymn, a memorized line of Scripture, these can all open something within us that wouldn't otherwise have been there - because we've heard it, because it was given to us by an individual or a community.

What I heard Lisa Miller telling me, telling us, was to have the courage to trust the faith that actually has sustained us. What I heard her saying was that we need to risk trusting that faith enough that we're willing to share it with others, including our children, including our grandchildren. I heard her encouraging us to trust that the gift we have been given in faith is good enough, is solid enough, is valuable enough, to hand down to others as if it's a precious heirloom. It's not up to us to determine what happens after that. But I heard in her words a bold summons to risk passing our faith along, just as the grandmother of Timothy, Lois, did to her daughter Eunice, and as they both did for Timothy himself.

The changes I've been playing, the stories I've been sharing, the reasons I've been offering, can all be summed up in those beautiful words contained in the book of Colossians, words I should have included in our readings for the morning: for we have this treasure in clay

jars, the writer says. The treasure is the faith that has been given to us. It was given to me by loving parents and grandparents, and it was nurtured in a community of Presbyterians in Southwestern Ohio, who loved me in all my high school awkwardness. They set me on my way, and gave me a firm foundation upon which to build my life. Sure, there are other foundations, and that's all to the good, but this one is mine, and it's yours as well. My prayer is that the same process of transmission happens here too. My prayer is that no matter our age, no matter our life circumstances, we too may trust, and pass down to those we love and care about, this treasure that has been given to us.