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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Mark 2: 23-28
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A Church for the Nones, the Somes, and the All-Ins

Well, the children have descended to their realm downstairs, the prayers have been spoken, and the Scripture read. That means you and I are left with just a few moments before we head off into our afternoons and evenings to do whatever it is we do. Some of us will head to work. Some of us will be immersed in parenting. Some of us will go on walks or get together with friends. Some of us will spend a lot of time alone. And if we're lucky, if we haven't bored you or offended you, we'll see you again a week from now, when, for an hour or so, we'll try to peel back the layers of life, and orient ourselves around (Dare we say it? Dare we think it?) something lasting, something eternal.

Each piece of a worship service is important, and I would insist that no one aspect is more important than any other. Some of you are here because you need the prayers. Others of you are drawn to the music. Some of you may be here because your spouse demanded it, or the kids did. There may even be a few of you who are drawn to this particular moment, to preaching. It's all part of an ensemble that we hope will do something for you, will take you somewhere, will create a tiny clearing in your life where something of the holy can grow. Or so we hope.

Here on this Homecoming Sunday, on this first Sunday in the cycle of our new year, it's worth saying that we don't take your presence, or your attention, for granted. There are a million things that vie for that attention, much of it very important. That you're willing to enter this ancient, and some might say, this outdated, practice of going to church is something that we, as the staff and ministers of FCCOL, wish to honor with everything that is in us. And speaking now as a preacher, I will say that I wish to honor your presence, and your attention, with the best words I can summon, with the best thinking I can manage, and with the most honest and forthright emotions I can convey. You have, I would imagine, arrived here in search of something, in hope of something, in need of something, and I don't take that lightly. None of us do.

Having said all that, it's worth noting that for more and more people in the United States, this arrangement, this habit of church attendance - choirs, sermons, rituals, prayers - is something they've decided they can do without. It's worth more than noting that phenomenon - it's worth thinking about it carefully. This morning I'd like to do just that by describing the experience of someone who identifies as a so-called "none," a once regular church goer who has gradually let that practice go. And then I'd like to do my best to articulate a vision as to how FCCOL might address itself to such a person, without neglecting those of us for whom religion, and gathering as a community of faith, is an essential part of our lives.

"Nones," for those who may not know, is a term used of late by sociologists to capture those who don't affiliate with any religious tradition. They may once have done so, but they've fallen out of the habit, or they may have grown disenchanted with this or that feature of religious life. For the most part, though, they're no more against churches or synagogues or mosques than they would be against the Lion's Club, or the Knights of Columbus. It's just not something they partake in. Sources indicate that in the United States, the number of those who identify as

“nones” has exploded. One source suggests that “nones” accounted for about 5% of adults in the 1990’s, while today, about 30% of adults so identify. It’s a category that is found among both Republicans and Democrats, among people with and without college degrees, and among people of many and varied racial and cultural backgrounds.

But here’s an interesting feature of this trend. While the percentage of “nones” has ballooned, people’s religious beliefs haven’t really declined at all. In fact, they’ve stayed more or less the same. They may not go to church or synagogue anymore, but they still believe in God, or some kind of higher spiritual power. They’re just choosing to go it alone, or they’re being spiritually nourished in some other way.

That’s where a recent article from the *Washington Post*, circulated among our Board of Stewardship, comes in. It’s entitled “I Left the Church - and Now Long for a Church for the Nones.” It was written by a journalist named Perry Bacon, Jr.¹ I read it with great interest. Bacon describes how he grew up going to church, a place in which he felt great support as a young person. He writes about continuing the practice throughout college and beyond. But something changed, he says, after 2016. Seeing the ways that Christianity was being used to promote bigotry and intolerance convinced many people, the author included, that they didn’t wish to be a part of any institution associated with that name. For Bacon and for others like him, that even included churches such as ours, which have done their level headed best to model an alternative form of Christian faith. It just felt like too much. And so Bacon began to attend church far less frequently. Millions of others did the same. Then came Covid, and as with so many others, he never found his way back.

Even so, something nags at him. “Theologically,” he says, “I’m comfortable being a none. But socially, I’m a little bit lost.” And so he goes on to imagine a church for people like himself, those without a clear set of beliefs about God, but with a profound longing for community and solidarity. He imagines a place where children are taught values, such as forgiveness. He imagines a place that leaves you feeling a little better about the world than when you came. He imagines a place where people across different age, and class, and racial lines can gather. He imagines a place that doesn’t force you into narrow doctrinal corners, one that upholds and celebrates science. And he imagines a place where people can share what’s happening in their lives, and can build new relationships, especially if and when the bottom falls out of life.

When I finished reading that description, I thought, “that’s exactly what I would hope for this community, for FCCOL.” As a minister, I have long sought to position this community precisely so as to appeal to those who may have written churches off, who may have been disappointed or hurt by church, and who may no longer be able to swallow certain metaphysical claims that one is often forced to make in spaces such as this. I want FCCOL to be a place that brings out the best in people, even when it’s costly or unpopular. I want it to be a place of unconditional acceptance, declaring and practicing the worth and dignity of all people in the fullness of their humanity, regardless of belief. I want this to be a church for the nones. In a way, I think it has been for some time now.

But here’s the rub. You’re here, after all. Whatever misgivings you might have about religion, you willingly entered this scene today, which means that at least for now, you’re actually not a none. I’m sure that more than a few of us can identify with the nones, and more than a few of us have been in that camp at some point during our lives. I have. But look, we’re

¹ See *The Washington Post*, “I Left the Church - and Now Long for a Church for the Nones,” by Perry Bacon, Jr., August 23, 2023.

all here today, which means that most of us are probably at least a “some,” affiliated with a religious institution at least some of the time. And then of course many of us, lots of us, are way more than that. We’re all-ins. To be all-in doesn’t mean that you take everything in the Bible literally, or that you affirm all the points of some creed or other. It just means that faith is something we take seriously, which includes being a part of a faith community, a church, with all that comes with it - its promise, its clumsiness, and hopefully its ordinary goodness. To be an all-in might also mean that you have a desire to dig deeper into the Bible and into theology, to learn more about these ancient faith practices we’re engaged in. What I’m saying, in other words, is that if we are a church for the nones, we also have to be a church for the somes and the all-ins. We need to be a church that people can access and feel comfortable in at multiple different levels.

It sounds like an impossible task, trying to be all things to all people. That usually doesn’t work out well. But I don’t think it’s impossible. Here’s how I conceive it. Years ago, I sat in a classroom listening to a friend of mine describe the nature of religious experience to a group of undergraduates. He explained it in a way that made sense not only for individuals, but I think for churches too. First, he drew a dot on the blackboard behind him, and he said, the dot stands for a primary experience, something that happens to us at some point in the course of our lives. That’s how religious experience begins: something happens. In a moment of anguish, we feel a wave of comfort and assurance roll over us. In a moment of grief, we feel held, and loved. In a moment of inner confusion, there comes to us an overwhelming sense of clarity - this is the way and not that. In some inexplicable moment, a sense of awe and transcendence overtakes us. I am utterly convinced that we all have those sorts of moments, those central, defining, core experiences which helped to define, positively, who we are. It may have happened in childhood. It may have happened to us as adults. It may have happened once and once only, or it may happen with some frequency. But something happened. The dot in the center of the blackboard represents that something.

But then my friend drew a circle around the dot. The circle represents a first attempt to describe or to name what happened in language. In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (one of my all time favorite novels, one that I will suggest that we read together this winter) the character Alyosha is grieving the loss of his mentor and friend, Father Zosima. He’s weeping in the darkness outside of the church in which the coffin is laid out, and he suddenly has one of those moments - he’s flooded with a wave of unexpected assurance and joy and it stuns him. And what Alyosha says is that “Somebody touched me.” Well, that sentence gives more definition to the dot. Now, instead of something happened, we have something more specific, more concrete: Alyosha says that he was touched, touched by a Somebody.

That’s still pretty loose, and so my friend drew another circle around the first one enclosing the dot, this time to represent additional language and thought. Instead of saying that something happened, or that somebody touched me, lots of people, when trying to understand those core experiences, have said things like Jesus touched me, or God reached in and took ahold of my heart. Here again, it helps to appeal to literature, and so we might think of St. Augustine in Book 8 of the *Confessions*. Feeling chased and pursued by something he cannot yet identify, he speaks of a “you,” who in a moment of inner turmoil turns him around, forcing him to confront himself, and who finally affects a wholesale conversion upon Augustine. The “you” in question is not merely a Somebody, but is a Somebody named by Augustine as God. But then, staying with Augustine, we can imagine another circle, another layer, drawn around the first two, for in Augustine’s accounting, not only did something happen, not only was he touched by

Somebody, and not only was this Somebody God, but that God is actually the Christian God (another circle, the third), whos is actually the first person of the Holy Trinity (and there's another circle, the fourth). And we could keep going if we wanted, but we've already got four layers around that center point. Each circle may actually be a really good way of describing that central event, the dot, but note: the more language we use, the more we try to define the experience with our words and concepts, the farther away we get from that original experience.

Here's what that means for us. Whether you're a none, a some, or an all-in, my wager is that you've had some kind of central experience in which you've felt loved, or graced, or held. I guess I could imagine an experience of radical deprivation in which a person would never have felt something like that, but I think it would be rare. But then each of us in this room have different ways of understanding those core experiences, different ways of framing it, different languages we can bring to bear on it. Not only that, we're each positioned along different layers, situated along different peripheries that surround that inner core. Some of us speak in highly specific terms about that core experience, using language developed by centuries among people of faith. Others of us are going to be fairly circumspect about assigning too much explanatory language to those core events and so we'll be content simply to let the mystery of that core moment be. Even so, we're all of us - nones, somes, and all-ins, in orbit around that center.

At its best, a church is going to draw people from many different circumferences, along different layers of that orbit. The words of a sermon, and the words of our prayers, and those in our hymns and calls to worship, are all going to fall along some ring, or orbit surrounding that center, sometimes closer and sometimes farther out. But it's also true that all of those rings, which is to say, all those layers of language and of concepts, that we construct around that originary experience can get pretty shaky. Words fail, after all. Concepts become outdated. The superstructure shakes, and sometimes it falls apart, or gets dismantled, piece by piece. And that can be ok, so long as you trust that dot in the center, that something that happened. As a minister, I'm committed to trying to preserve and to honor that originary event, the thing that happened to each one of us along the way to let us know that there's something more at work in our lives. I'm most interested in that, and while I'm not indifferent to the rings, I don't wish to get too lost in arguments about what ring or what set of words or concepts is best for comprehending that core. I simply wish to learn to trust that experience, however it might finally be named.

That is, in essence, the defining task for all of us, as we enter into relationship with one another in this thing called church. To recognize and to honor that deep inner experience, while making allowances for the many different ways that exist among us for understanding and naming that experience. That's the basis on which we can construct a thriving church for the somes and the all-ins, but for the nones as well.

I'll wrap things up by turning, at long last, to our Scripture lesson for the morning. In it, Jesus and his disciples are criticized because they don't adhere to the strict meaning of the Sabbath. They pick some grain for food, which seems trifling, but the religious leaders of the day note that it falls outside the law. At that point Jesus asks a remarkable question: were human beings made in order to keep the Sabbath, or was the Sabbath made for human beings? In our own context, thinking about the nones, the somes and the all-ins, we might hear Jesus's words in this way: are human beings meant simply to fit into the structure, the institution of Sabbath keeping and church going, with its ready-made language and concepts? Are we meant merely to accept all those rings around the center, and then to arrange our lives accordingly? Or might we listen to those around us, like Perry Bacon, who are saying what they actually wish for in a

Sabbath? Might we listen to our own hearts, as we seek to be a church in ways that speak to and nourish those primary and core experiences that brought us to a place like this in the first place? Are humans made to fit into the pre-existing structure of churches, or are churches meant to adapt to the needs of those who exist among it?

Two weeks from today, we'll be inviting all of you to gather for a community conversation after the worship service. We'll be asking you to reflect a little on your own sense of faith, that deep inner core where "something happened." What was it? Where did it come from? How do you nurture it? But we'll also be asking you to imagine how a community like this one can meet the needs of those who are here - the somes and the all-ins - but the nones as well, who might be longing for a place like this without even realizing it. We can't be all things to all people, and we're not going to forget the things that have mattered most to us over the years. But as the winds of change swirl about us, we can seek to be responsive to the needs that exist among and around us.

And so we draw to the end of this peculiar little pause that we find in our weekly rhythm. My hope is that whether you're a none, a some, or an all-in, that somewhere within it, that dot, that little clearing of goodness where, as we say, "something happened," - my hope is that that part of you has been nurtured and strengthened. I hope you might even come back next week to do it again!