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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: I Corinthians 12: 14-20, 26; Mark 10: 2-4; Mark 8: 1-3

November 5, 2023

“We Will Send No One Away”

Most every single week, I stand before you at the end of each service and offer words found in the Book of Common Prayer. Many of you know the words by heart now. Among the most important lines in that benediction are the ones imploring us to “honor all people.” It’s a statement found in various places throughout the New Testament, but it’s given its fullest expression in the words of I Corinthians that we heard a little earlier. There, as we affirmed in our Call to Worship this morning, the Apostle Paul urges his readers to understand themselves as belonging to one another, as needing one another, being members of a common body. That’s an ideal that has inspired churches and faith communities for generations. But it is also an ideal of civic belonging, an ideal for how our towns, our state, and indeed our country can and should operate. Inspired by the Apostle Paul, we can say that honoring all people, and being members of a diverse public - all of us somehow in need of one another - is both a truth, and an aspiration, worthy of further meditation on the Sunday prior to an election.

At our best, Paul’s metaphor allows us to understand that, whatever our racial or class background, we need one another. He allows us to sense that whatever our gender or sexual identity, we depend upon one another. He helps us to feel that whatever our age or income level, and whatever our religious beliefs or our voting patterns, we need one another in order to be whole. He helps us to recognize that whatever level of education we possess or whatever vocation we pursue, we’re dependent upon one another for our mutual well being. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians helps us to understand the importance, indeed the necessity, of difference, even radical difference, within our communities. That’s no easy task. You can be sure that if Paul had to set that ideal in ink, the Corinthians were every bit as riven by conflict and division as we are. But he helps us all to see the shining promise that each of us hold out for one another, as members of a common body.

At our worst, however, we can yield to voices and to movements that would cut off certain expressions of our humanity. At our worst, we risk acceding to forces that would erase, silence, closet, or otherwise diminish the very being of our neighbors. Lately, such impulses have been directed in all sorts of directions, making sayable and doable what had previously been unsayable and undoable. That includes expressions of verbal abuse, and sometimes outright violence, against immigrants, people of color, Jews, but also Muslims, Palestinians, but also Israelis, and against women. But it’s been particularly true for those in the LGBTQ+ community, and to put an even finer point on it, for those in the trans community. Too often, as a society, we are falling woefully short when it comes to honoring those in our midst who have different life experiences. We become like those in the Corinthian community, who excluded or shunned others, and thereby cut off a necessary part of their own bodies. That’s why we need reminders such as that found in Paul’s writings more than ever today, reminders to honor all people.

I don’t need to remind you of the ugliness of this past summer, when some residents of Old Lyme sought to remove two books from the shelves of the town’s library. It was part of a national effort that has taken place in towns throughout the country, targeting books having to do

with gender diverse experiences on one hand, and books having to do with racial justice on the other. In our case, the efforts concentrated upon two recent young adult books attempting to treat the wide array of sexualities and gender experiences that are a part of our world.

In each of the library attacks around the country, books serve as a proxy for people. In most quadrants of our culture, though not all, you cannot publicly attack those in the LGBTQ+ community, and you cannot publicly attack people of color without facing significant legal and social consequences. But you can go after libraries and school boards. In so doing, you *can* effectively silence the voices of those who belong to such communities. You *can* prevent their lives from being seen. And you *can*, in effect, contribute to a form of public erasure and closeting, all the while creating a line of plausible deniability - no, no, this isn't about people but rather about questionable materials in books. We mustn't be fooled. These are attempts to hide not merely a book, but to hide the experiences, and the human lives, portrayed in those books. Life is already difficult enough for those undergoing such experiences. To have groups of people in your town seeking to remove material concerning your experience from local libraries communicates that, in truth, they are interested in removing *you*. It is, in other words, the opposite of honoring all people, and recognizing that everyone is a member of a common body. It is as though one part of the body is saying to another, "I have no need of you."

Having said all that, I also recognize that for many people, it's difficult to understand the new developments and norms surrounding gender. It can be difficult to adjust to the language - which pronouns to use for example - and harder still to understand the experiences of those for whom gender isn't a settled or fixed matter, given at birth. When faced with new realities of human life and behavior, it can be tempting to respond from fear, rather than curiosity, or better still, a warm embrace. That's why we're doing what we're doing today - as a reminder of the human beings, and the lived experiences, that are often ignored in library or school board, or medical care controversies. That's why it's such an honor to have Katy, but also Clare and Seven with us today. Clare will shortly offer a portion of her own story, but before she does, I want to suggest one more reason why people of faith might respond with a kind of recognition and embrace of the trans experience, rather than a rejection of it. To do that, I need to tell a little about my own journey on this issue.

In graduate school, I read one of the foundational books for understanding the role of gender, and gender transformation, in our world, a book called *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler. It's a very dense theoretical read, but it's also incredibly important. She suggests that our identities aren't fixed or given according to biology, but rather that they're taught, and then performed, over time. For example, when my children were born at Yale New Haven hospital, they were immediately given either a pink or a blue cap, depending on their anatomy. The caps were an early initiation into what we can think of as gender - the roles we're expected to play - either blue or pink - given the bodies we inhabit. But for many people, those roles don't fit the bodies they inhabit. What Butler does in *Gender Trouble* is to help us to sense the possibilities for actually creating identities which actually match what we might feel inside. Butler has given a whole generation of young people the ability to imagine possibilities other than those that have been assigned by the accidents of biology and culture - by the blue or pink caps placed upon our heads at birth.

Now, I was studying theology at the time, but I immediately sensed that Butler was talking about something that I had encountered in church ever since I was a child. Throughout the entire biblical narrative, old names are replaced by new names. Old identities are exchanged for new ones. Abram becomes Abraham; Jacob becomes Israel; Simon becomes Peter. Saul

becomes Paul. As in Judith Butler, in the Bible identity is never fixed or given at birth. It is something that is invented across time. Who we have been need not be reflective of who we now are. Who we now are need not be reflective of who we might yet wish to become. That's a provision of freedom espoused throughout the Bible, a beautiful provision that suggests we are free to change and grow into new, and sometimes very different versions of who we have been up until that point.

Later theologians have called that process *metanoia*, which simply means "becoming new," or as the theologian Paul Tillich has said, putting on the "new being." It is a structure of living as old as Genesis, as old as St. Augustine, but it's been given a helpful update in the work of Judith Butler. It is demonstrated to us by all of those who have had the courage to become a new creation, a new being, when their inner experience does not match what they had been given at birth. "Behold, I am making all things new," God says at the end of the Book of Revelation. I would contend that such a thing is happening before our very eyes. Of course, it is also a very old thing, as old as Plato, as old as Ovid, as old as the Bible itself. Whether understood as new, or old, or somehow both, the experience of gender diverse individuals is something worthy of our recognition, and our care. It is worthy of our honor.

With that, I would like to invite Clare to share a little of her own experience with us.

(Clare)

I would like us to close with an affirmation. Throughout the New Testament, we encounter stories of Jesus being asked to send people away. Faced with a kind of anxiety, his critics and sometimes the disciples too, dealt with their own inner turmoil by instructing Jesus to remove particular individuals from his company. They behave, in other words, the way many churches, and many communities in the United States, have behaved across time: they send people away. But Jesus always refuses that impulse. It's a model for how we can respond when asked or told by others to "send someone away." It's a model for how churches can and should respond, but it's also a model for how cities and towns, and indeed, how a democracy should function. We will send no one away. I'd like to offer a litany of those passages right now, each of which we shall follow with our own response: we will send no one away.<sup>1</sup>

From Mark 10: "Some Pharisees wanted to test Jesus. So they came up to him and asked if it was right for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus asked them, 'What does the Law of Moses say about that?' They answered, 'Moses allows a man to write out divorce papers and send his wife away.'"

Let us respond: We will send no one away.

Again, from Mark 10: "Some people brought their children to Jesus so that he could bless them by placing his hands on them. But his disciples told the people to stop bothering him."

Let us respond: We will send no one away.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a litany by Meredith Bischoff, found on the interdenominational website, "Institute for Welcoming Resources." <http://www.welcomingresources.org/openingworship.htm>.

From Mark 8: “In those days, when there was a very great multitude, and they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to himself, and said to them, ‘I have compassion on the multitude, because they have stayed with me now three days, and have nothing to eat. If I send them away fasting to their home, they will faint on the way, for some of them have come a long way.’”

Let us respond: We will send no one away.

From Matthew 22: “And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.’ And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, ‘Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.’”

Let us respond: We will send no one away.

Long ago, this community became an open and affirming congregation, welcoming and celebrating diversity of gender and sexual expression as intentional acts of God’s creation. The realm of God includes all persons, including all sexual orientations, all gender identities, and many and different family units. We, as the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, seek to embrace everyone in the full life of our community, even as we seek to ensure that everyone has a place in the wider communities that we are all a part of - our towns, our cities, our state, our country, our world. For we are all members of one another.

Let us say it together: We will send no one away.

Amen.