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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
Text: Matthew 5: 1-12  
Sermon March 17, 2024

“Like a Bandit Getting Over His Lawless Ways:”  
Or, Why Dante’s *Purgatorio* Matters

Great literature is a hand extended from the past. When we grasp that hand, it can be a guide and a source of solace, as we confront the challenges of the present.

That is, in large part, why I have elected to have us read the entirety of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in a grand three year sequence. Last year, on the evening of Maundy Thursday, we descended into the depths of the *Inferno*, glimpsing with Dante the human behaviors that threaten one’s individual integrity, while also undermining the body politic. It was a long but also an exhilarating evening, as 35 or 36 different readers performed the cantos of Dante’s night vision. It ended in the morning hours, when we all gathered in the connector, and raised a toast to the great Florentine poet, and to our own endurance. This year on Maundy Thursday we’ll take on the second part of the *Commedia*, the *Purgatorio*, joining Dante and Virgil as they ascend the mountain of God toward earthly paradise. Next year we’ll ascend into the cosmos, as Dante is led by Beatrice through the heavens in *Paradiso*.

It’s an unusual exercise, and I know that more than a few of you have wondered what the point is. I get it. It’s a 700 year old poem loaded with theological and cultural assumptions that most of us, I think, no longer share. It’s long. It’s sometimes dense, and obscure, with references that can be difficult to track. Finally, it seems remote from the kinds of things with which our minds tend to be occupied - the many concerns of daily living, and all the pressing challenges before us. Why, as a minister, should I insist on this poem, and why might you consider paying it any mind at all?

What I wish to offer today is a rationale for reading the *Purgatorio*, but really, a rationale for allowing ourselves to be instructed by Dante in the 21st century. Peter Hawkins has already provided us with a beautiful lecture on the *Purgatorio*, and I don’t wish to repeat what Peter has already done, better than I ever could. It’s available on our website, and it’s worth reading or watching it in full if you haven’t already. Rather, I wish to suggest to you why, as your minister, I think this work can matter to us, especially right now. I wish to suggest how it might even serve as a necessary spiritual companion and guide for you in your own life. It is, as I said earlier, a hand reaching out from the past in order to help later generations navigate their own existential burdens. It’s a hand reaching out toward all of us. The question is why we might wish to grasp such a hand in the first place.

Start here. In the opening canto of the *Purgatorio*, we find a tender and lovely scene that takes place between Dante and Virgil. It captures everything that Dante’s poem is meant to do across 32 more cantos. They’ve just emerged from hell, and they find themselves on the shores of what seems to be a Mediterranean island. They’re surrounded by the blue of the waters, and behind them an enormous mountain rises. Both Dante and Virgil are shaken by what they had witnessed in hell. They had seen the very worst of the human condition, and it’s not an exaggeration to say that it leaves them traumatized. As they orient themselves within this new space, Virgil offers what amounts to a ministrations of grace. Here is how Dante writes it:

We were making our way across the solitary plain,  
Like a man who returns to the road he has lost...  
When we came there where the dew strives with the sun...  
My master gently laid both hands outspread on the grass.  
I therefore, reached toward him my tear stained cheeks,  
And on them he wholly disclosed  
That color of mine which Hell had hidden.

Virgil wipes the tears from Dante's face, but he wipes away the hellish grime that had gathered there as well. In other words, he restores something of Dante's humanity after the ordeal of the *Inferno*, giving him the will to carry on. It is a healing gesture. Insofar as Dante the pilgrim is an everyman and everywoman, he becomes something like us, as we seek to overcome that which may have harmed or wounded us at various times in our lives. It is a gesture that announces that the *Purgatorio* will be, as one scholar puts it, a holy hospital for the recovery of one's deepest humanity.

It's an image that, even 700 years later, continues to resonate. Johnny Cash, for example, captures the essence of Dante and Virgil on the shores of Purgatory in a song called "Like a Soldier," from his album *American Recordings*. His voice is shot, and the singer seems bone tired, as if he's passed through his own inferno. But he's found a place of repose, and it feels like grace. Cash sings, "I'm like a soldier getting over the war. I'm like a bandit getting over his lawless ways. I don't have to live like that any more." Dante, his face wiped clean by Virgil, is just like that: a soldier getting over the war, a bandit getting over his lawless ways. There's relief and recovery in Virgil's tender touch. Have you ever felt like that? Have you found a space of repose after a long ordeal, in which you've felt that sort of grace?

But I think there's even more contained within this image. It invites us to think of the ways a piece of art has soothed and oriented us after a period of destabilization. I remember hearing Cornel West, the great philosopher and activist, talk one time about how, during his Ph.D. studies, he would sometimes come home after a day of classes and seminar discussions feeling despondent. There were few African American faculty at Princeton in those days, and fewer still who were willing to approach philosophy from an African American perspective. He sometimes felt demeaned, he said, but then he would go home, and he would put on John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. And the sounds of Coltrane's sax would be like Virgil's hand upon his face, wiping away the tears, and the grime of what felt, sometimes, quite hellish. How many times have I done something similar, allowing the songs of Bob Dylan or Van Morrison to wash over me whenever I've felt discouraged. They are akin to the hand of Virgil. There at the base of Mount Purgatory, in that loving gesture, it is as if Dante the poet is announcing his own intention for the *Purgatorio* itself: to be the hand of Virgil on *our* faces, whenever we are forced to pass through an inferno.

Here is another reason to reach out, and to grasp the outstretched hand that is the *Divine Comedy*, but especially the *Purgatorio*. Dante describes the catastrophe that was all around him, but he also imagines a way out of the catastrophe. He writes the *Inferno*, which was, among other things, a nearly realistic portrayal of the scorpion's nest that was 13th and 14th century Florence. Dante himself was stung, time and again, by those scorpions. He witnessed his world collapse into a bitter civil war. He knew the utter destruction of combat, having fought in a major battle, a detail he includes in the *Inferno*. He was exiled from his city by his political enemies, losing all of his property. He became, in essence, a wandering beggar, dependent upon the generosity of others not only for his daily bread, but for the conditions in which he could work on his poem. Dante surveyed the catastrophe of his era, of his own life, and really of the human condition, with an almost journalistic eye, not wholly unlike those brave writers who have embedded in Gaza, or Ukraine. In other words, Dante grasped the horror of his time - and our own. But he doesn't leave us there. He shows us the way out in the *Purgatorio*, and then later, in the *Paradiso*.

To give you a sense for how bold Dante's vision is, it's helpful to contrast his movement out of hell and toward something better with a group of writers from the middle of the 20th century, comprising what is now called The Frankfurt School. They were Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, and a handful of others, including, at times, one of my theological heroes, Paul Tillich. These are all writers that I have loved, and learned from, over the years. All of them wrote in the shadow of the rise of fascism throughout Europe, and especially in Germany - another *Inferno* moment. Their books are an incomparable guide for analyzing what went wrong in that era - economically, politically, psychologically. But according to a recent study of their writings, called, quite tellingly, *Grand Hotel Abyss*, none of them was especially talented at imagining an alternative. It was as if the best they could imagine was to make some kind of shelter within the abyss itself, and then to describe its contours, to prevent others from falling into it. For all of their intellectual gusto, they became something like the protesters who can articulate what they are against, but can seldom articulate the kind of life they are for. To use Dante's language, they escaped the *Inferno*, but they remained trapped somewhere along its edges.

Like few others in history, Dante refuses that trap. In a scene from the second canto of the *Purgatorio*, Dante dramatizes that specific temptation. There, he meets a fellow poet and musician, Casella, not far from the place where he and Virgil exited hell. Dante begs Casella for a song.

If a new law does not take from you  
Memory or practice of the songs of love  
Which used to quiet in me all my longings,  
May it please you to comfort my soul,  
Which coming hither with its body is so wearied.

Casella begins to sing, and a group of souls cluster around him, until the guardian of Purgatory, Cato, sets them all in motion. The work, Dante seems to be saying, isn't merely to describe the horrors of the world and to trust that that is enough. The real work is to create something better. And that's what the *Purgatorio* is about. It's what we're called to as well.

The final reason I'll cite for reaching out to grasp Dante's proffered hand has to do with the particulars of that upbuilding, which is to say, how that alternative vision of life is created. This too relates to us. As Dante and Virgil ascend the mountain, they encounter penitents who are trying to shed the habits of mind and body that create hells on earth - basically the seven deadly sins (pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust). But that remains a movement of negation, a statement of what the poet is against. At the end of each penitential exercise, after the soul has been cured, we glimpse what it is that each soul is striving *for*. A fragment of one of the Beatitudes offered by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is sung or spoken as the soul moves to the next level of the mountain. In essence, each person is becoming a living expression of the Beatitudes. On the terrace of pride, for example, souls carry enormous boulders that threaten to crush them. We are given to understand that the weight isn't so much a punishment imposed upon them, but is rather an expression of their own burdensome self regard. When they at last lay those burdens down, a song is sung, based on the first of the Beatitudes, blessed are the poor in spirit. Here is how Dante puts it:

As we were turning our steps,  
*Beati pauperes spiritu* was sung so sweetly  
As no words would tell.  
Ah, how different these passages from those of Hell,  
For here the entrance is with songs,  
And down there with fierce laments.

So it goes up the mountain of Purgatory. For each vice that has undermined the personhood of the souls themselves, for each vice that has corrupted the society around them, a virtue is offered in return. After shedding the vice of envy, they hear sung about them *Beati misericordes*, blessed are the merciful. After the terrace of wrath, they hear *Beati pacifici*, blessed are the peacemakers, and so on up the mountain. As they climb, Dante and Virgil are becoming living embodiments of the Beatitudes themselves. Dante uses poetry, liturgy, and Scripture to fashion a different kind of humanity than what he had witnessed in the pit, and in his own troubled sojourn on earth.

Were you to ask what I hope might happen to us as individuals, and as a community, as a result of investing ourselves in the life of faith, my response would be similar to Dante's. We're here to learn the Beatitudes. Better still, I would say that we're here to *become* the Beatitudes. We're here to learn what it is to be poor in spirit. We're here to learn what it is to be merciful. We're here to learn what it is to become peacemakers. And in the words of *The Message*, we're here to learn what it is to work up an appetite for God. Dante shows how those traits have personal significance, but he also shows how they have a public and a political significance too. How much of our own political woes can be attached to the outsized pride of certain individuals? How much of our social turmoil is born of greed, where those who have take still more? How much of our public discourse is born from a spirit of wrath and revenge, as we lash out in bitterness at those we perceive to have wronged us? What would it mean to enter this holy hospital, in which we learned the opposite virtues, humility and forbearance, generosity and care? What would it mean to undergo that kind of

formation? People are still people, of course (and the *Purgatorio* takes place on earth after all), but I would suggest, with Dante, that the world would feel quite a bit different. It would feel a little less like hell, and just a little more like Paradise.

That's what we're trying to enact here at FCCOL. And it's why I've invited all of us to undertake this vast three year project of performing each of the parts of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In it, we learn what it is to be healed by art, as the poet wipes the grime from our faces. In it, we learn how to become cognizant of the hells around us, without becoming trapped by those hells. And in it, we undergo a reformation of the spirit, in which goodness itself is learned and embodied.

I believe that *The Divine Comedy* is a poem that is far more about this world than the next. It is an encyclopedia, in which Dante creates a vast synthesis of classical and Christian cultures, of ancient myths and yesterday's news, of astronomy and the sciences and Scripture and human psychology, all of it bound together within one giant volume. Dante's achievement is nothing short of breathtaking, and it is meant for us, here, now. As one of Dante's best readers put it, "It is unthinkable to read the cantos of Dante without aiming them in the direction of the present day. They were made for that. They are missiles capturing the future."

To return to our earlier metaphor, *the Commedia* is a hand reaching toward you. I hope you'll reach out your hand in return. I hope you'll be a part of the ascent of Mount Purgatory on Maundy Thursday. I hope you'll stay to the end, even if it means you doze off here and there stretched out on these pews. Or if you can't do that, I hope you'll come for just a little while, and that you'll sense the power of this still living poem. And if that too is a bridge too far, a step too high to climb, if poetry just isn't your thing, that's ok too. I just hope that you'll sense the kind of world, and the kind of lives, that we're trying to build around here, using Dante as our guide.

We'll close with these alluring lines, found in Canto 9 of the *Purgatorio*. Let them be our mantra:

As a man dismayed who turns to face the facts  
changes his fear to trust in his own strength  
when to his eyes the truth has been uncovered  
So I changed; and when my leader saw me freed  
from those anxieties, up by the rampart  
he moved, and I behind him, toward the height.

With Dante and Virgil, we too ascend toward the heights. Amen.