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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
Texts: Ruth 1: 1-16; Daniel 3: 19-27  
April 7, 2024

The Church of Timshel: Celebrating the Ministry of Rev. David W. Good

A week ago I stood in this pulpit with a reminder of the good news of Easter: What Dies Doesn't Stay Dead was the refrain. Little did I know how important those words would be for the week to come. When David Good died this past Tuesday, word started spreading almost immediately. It was a little like what happens in Star Wars, when, after the death of a Jedi, one or another of the characters notes that "there has been a great disturbance in the Force." Many of us felt, and continue to feel, that disturbance in the "Force" in our hearts and souls. To use another metaphor, it was as though the extended community that is the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme is a vast spider's web composed of many tendrils that hold it aloft. One crucial tendril within that web was suddenly broken on Tuesday, and you could feel the other parts of it trembling in response. Even if you didn't know David, even if you started attending here long after his tenure, you could feel the web vibrating and shaking. It trembles still, for we have lost a leader of enormous vision and skill, a minister the likes of which the world rarely sees - and that is not hyperbole. We have lost a source of stability, one who, even if we didn't see him often, we knew was there, which filled us with a kind of assurance. And, for many of us, we have lost a friend.

But what dies doesn't stay dead. That's the good news of Easter, and it's what I wish to emphasize once again this morning. In the Taylor Swift song from which I borrowed that line, the lyrics continue: "I should have asked you questions, I should have asked you how to be, asked you to write it down for me." I have been comforted this past week by the fact that David did write it down - in his letters and in his emails (nobody used email with more enthusiasm and frequency than David W. Good!). But most of all, he wrote it down for us in his sermons.

This morning, insofar as it is possible, I'd like to turn the pulpit over to David once again. And I would like us all to hear his words once more - or perhaps for the first time. I want you to hear them as a reminder of his love for this community, and for all of you as members of FCCOL. I want you to hear them as a reminder of the firm foundation that he helped to construct, a foundation that continues to support us. And I want you to hear them as a comforting assurance that what dies doesn't stay dead. The words and the vision of David Good continue to live, in our hearts and in our memories, but also in the very bones of this congregation.

I'll be reading several passages from his collection of sermons, *A Place of Grace: The Gospel According to the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme*. On my first meeting with him, just after I had accepted the position here, he gave me a copy of the book, and I took it home to read it. My first thought, I confess, was "O God. These are really good. I've got my work cut out for me." But then my second thought was, "Thank God. This is the kind of church that I would wish to belong to. This is the kind of church in which I can feel at home." In many ways, it's because of David's leadership that the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme has been and continues to be a home for me, just the way it has been for many of you.

Here is the first passage I'd like to read to you. It's from a sermon delivered on September 30th, 2001, only a few short weeks after September 11th. It doesn't touch on that event at all, but it speaks to it in a different way, by celebrating the partnership at Green Grass with our Lakota friends. Here's what David said, speaking of what was then a 16 year partnership:

"If one were into making predictions, someone sixteen years ago might have said, "there's no future in this relationship. There's too much water under the bridge, and the color of that water is the color of blood."

But if it is the job of a preacher to preach Good News, I am here to tell you that miracles do happen, that wonderful things can and do happen when you allow yourself the opportunity and the patience and the

perseverance, to engage in what Jesus called “the ministry of reconciliation.” So necessary, so critical in this troubled world in which we live.

Let us consider the story from the book of Ruth. Ruth and Naomi were from two different tribes, two different cultures, two different nations. Their respective nations didn’t like each other very much; at times they had been at war with one another, but love, as we all know, sometimes transcends national or racial or ethnic boundaries, and Ruth, a Moabite, fell in love with Naomi’s son, an Israelite.

When he died, Ruth decided that she would stay with her mother-in-law to give her whatever help or support she needed. Perhaps you might say that the fact that she even liked her mother in law and her mother in law liked her was miracle enough! But the fact that they were from different tribes, different nations makes it even more miraculous.

And, of course, it is in this scripture lesson that we find those beautiful words that Ruth said to Naomi: Where you go I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if this were the final chapter in all the warring tribes of the earth? That’s what the ministry of reconciliation is all about, and I want to say how proud I am of you, the members and friends of this congregation, for you have all been active participants in this ministry of reconciliation.

It would have been so easy for you to have said, “No, it’s not worth the effort; it’s too far away, and there’s too much water under the bridge.” But instead, you have kept alive those beautiful words of Ruth. In this partnership, you have said, “Where you go, I will go. And where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

We simply cannot imagine, and we must never underestimate what wonderfully healing words those are.”

That passage exemplifies not only the work that takes place between our community and that of Green Grass (and, by the way, there shall be a journey to Green Grass this June, where we will find ways to honor David’s legacy there). But it also points toward the work that David was embarking upon even as he preached those words, as he reached out to the Muslim community after 9/11. I believe he carried those words with him on Tree of Life journeys. And I believe he carried those words with him even unto the end, sharing himself in a gesture of solidarity and reconciliation across the Christian, Muslim, and also Indigenous traditions. David practiced what he preached and he died as he lived, trusting in those wonderfully healing words of Ruth.

Perhaps we can take strength and inspiration from that witness, and from that ministry of reconciliation. For we too belong to God - not the Christian God, not the Muslim God, not the Jewish God, but to the God in whom we all live and move and have our being. So too we belong not to this or that race, or to this or that nation, but to the human race and the human family, a reconciliatory truth to which David never ceased testifying, in life or in death.

The second passage I have selected comes from a 1988 sermon, preached after he had returned from his first journey to South Africa during apartheid. In it, he offers another crucial piece of theology that orients much of who he became, and what this church has come to be. Here, again, are David’s words:

“Why do Christians and Christian churches involve themselves in other cultures and other races? Why would a church in Old Lyme want to make friends with the people of a church in the city of Johannesburg, New York, or New Haven? Why not stay here in our own neck of the woods, draw a neat red line around our community and pretend that the rest of the world just does not exist?

Well, there are several arguments against this, but what I would like to offer this morning is one that stems from our Christian faith, and this is what has been called “A Theology of Accompaniment.”

As we think about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, we see that a lot of his time was spent in going places and just being there with people in their own unique culture, whether they were Gentiles or Jews, in their homes, visiting with them in their places of employment, in their boats and in their

temples. Breaking bread and sharing a meal with a broad diversity of people was very much a part of Jesus' ministry. And in these visits he was forever crossing over all those red lines that we are so fond of drawing.

So this Theology of Accompaniment is, first of all, rooted in a pattern of ministry exemplified by Jesus Christ. But, also, I would like to call your attention to the well-known story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They refused to bow down in worship to a tower of gold, and so were punished by King Nebuchadnezzar by being thrown into a fiery furnace. The king looked into the furnace and said "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt, and the fourth looks like an angel."

Now, this story has some important things to say about this so-called Theology of Accompaniment. First of all, we have to think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and how they accompanied each other in their defiance of the state. There is strength in numbers. We all need the support we receive from our families and friends. We all gather together in communities of faith, there not to find some escape from the world but there to be of moral support to each other, there to encourage each other in our Christian faith.

But also, we should remember that other most important part of the story: that fourth person there inside the furnace who to the king looked like an angel. Now we all know that angels come in many different forms, in many different shapes and sizes.

What I would like to suggest is that we as Christians, we as the church of Jesus Christ, sometimes can be that fourth person there inside that fiery furnace. And this also is an important part of that Theology of Accompaniment. We never know when or where what we say or what we do or who we are may have a dramatic, angelic effect upon someone else.

We have all spent some time in that fiery furnace, and we all give thanks for specific people or churches who have been for us as angels.

But this morning I want us not only to give thanks for our angels, but also I would like for us to engage in that much more difficult task of trying to think of how we, ourselves, have been that fourth person in someone else's fiery furnace.

(David concludes by saying): The most important thing you have to give is yourself, knowing that when you give yourself, you are giving far more than yourself. For you are more than yourself. You are an angel. You are the Christian Church and you are the Body of Christ, and someone needs your company."

David Good was certainly that angel to many of us, even as this congregation has been that angel to many communities around the world. But I also want to acknowledge that when David was in his own fiery furnace during these last six or eight months, many of you served as his angel within the flames: Becky, Carleen, Ted Crosby, Faye Richardson, Emily Fisher, Maryanne Baez, and John and Jane Braselton. To that we should add the many people from the Berlin Mosque who supported David, especially Ghoufran Allibabidi and Reza Mansoor. All of them, all of you, have demonstrated what it is to practice a Theology of Accompaniment, a lesson that David first taught, and then received himself. May we all learn to practice such a theology, such a ministry, within our own lives.

The final passage I wish to highlight has to do with the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme. It is an affirmation of the kind of church David wished this to be, and indeed, the kind of church that it has been and, I hope, continues to be. It has to do with the word *Timshel*, which in the Bible is often translated as "Thou shalt," or "You must." But as David argued, the word might better be translated as "Thou mayst." Here is an excerpt from the sermon on *Timshel*, preached in 2011, not long before his retirement.

"I love this church's emphasis upon self-determination and freedom of choice. When I first came to this church some thirty eight years ago as a seminarian, I loved theology. I loved the existential, spiritual questions but I wasn't particularly enamored with any church of any denomination. The church in which I was brought up, once a vital and passionate church, had allowed itself to become a place of autocratic, sanctimonious self-righteousness, and little by little I saw the spirit of that church fizzle out like a birthday balloon on the day after the party. I saw intellectual integrity sacrificed on the altar of false piety. I saw its illustrious zeal for changing the world become little more than a desire to draw a sharp line between the

saved and the damned, and in my spiritual questions I found myself more and more seeking the company of such people as Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, and Robert Ingersoll.

But then one May Sunday morning I came out from Yale Divinity School to visit a place called The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme. Not knowing what a Congregational church was, I opened up the Constitution and By-Laws of our church, and there under Article III are words that have become very sacred to me and were at that time like a spiritual emancipation proclamation. These are the words: Each member shall have the undisturbed right to follow the Word of God according to the dictates of his or her own conscience under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.

These words are what make it possible for us to be the Church of Timshel.

If you want to disagree with everything I have ever said from this pulpit, *Timshel*. Thou mayst. If you want to forge a new theology for yourself, write your own statement of faith, *Timshel*. Thou mayst. If you want to think of Jesus or the Holy Spirit in a very different way than the person sitting next to you, *Timshel*. Thou mayst. If you want to pursue your passion to make this a better world than what it is, *Timshel*. Thou mayst. And if, on the other hand, you need a place of sanctuary, a place where you can be quiet and through prayer and quiet meditation withdraw from the world for a while, *Timshel*. Thou mayst. If you want to try with all your might to become a better person tomorrow than what you are today, *Timshel*. Thou mayst.

I love being a part of a church where instead of a lot of “Thou shalt and Thou shalt not” we put the burden and not only the burden but also the mantle of dignity back on our shoulders, saying, *Timshel*. Thou mayst.”

To which we can only say...Amen.

Friends, what dies doesn't stay dead. David now belongs to God and to the world. But his spirit shall continue to live with us. Thank God for such vision. Thank God for such a ministry. Thank God for such a human being as David Good.

What dies doesn't stay dead. Amen.