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First Congregational Church in Old Lyme
Texts: Psalm 77:1-3, Matthew 7:7-11, Mark 14:32-36
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Lessons Learned During a Period of Spiritual Dryness

In addition to our work granting scholarships and providing education in Haiti, Ted and I for over 15 years have helped the artists and craftsmen in the region where we work. This group of 40 are mostly in their 30's and 40's with young families. They are talented, creative, and most of them self-taught. With little income, they count on their sales of art to survive. Tourism has never been very high in Haiti, especially in the Artibonite Valley where we work, which is about a 3-hour drive from Port-au-Prince. Now there is no tourism and very few, if any, international visitors come to this region, therefore the artists have no way to sell their art.

In past years, when we brought visitors with us to Haiti, we organized a Haitian art market, where the artists came to where we were staying and displayed their art. I selected items for our on-line Esty site, and our Partnership shop located here in this church, and the visitors had a chance to buy the art directly from the artists. This was a fun time, but also a time of intense bargaining, as the artists tried to sell as much as possible. Everyone traveled back with art and crafts in their suitcases. The system worked well, and the Partnership store and our on-line Etsy shop were always stocked. The artists receive 100% of the proceeds from sales, which is about \$14,000 annually. I want to thank many of you who have supported our Haitian artists through the years.

Over the past three years, because of the dangerous political environment, we haven't been able to travel to Haiti. With dwindling inventory, I devised a different way of selecting and receiving art from artists. With the help of Erline, our Haitian guesthouse manager, we designate one week in October when artists come to the house and display their work around our large porch. Erline manages the schedule and calls me on Facetime when the artists are ready. After greeting each artist, Erline carefully holds her phone over each item, and I say, 'yes' or 'no', or 'I can't see it', 'go back' etc. You get the picture. It is a long and laborious selection process with all the artists during the week. After the selection week is over, Erline and several artists help in packing the art, and several staff members bring the art to Port-au-Prince, traveling 4 hours on terrible back roads to avoid the gangs. The boxes are brought to the shipping company DHL at the airport and are mailed to us for a very steep price.

This year I received 5 large boxes. One box had been re-packaged by DHL, because the bottom fell out during shipping. Everything had been haphazardly thrown in an orange bag, placed back in the broken box and put in the new box. According to Erline's inventory list, a large roll of 78 paintings was missing. I quickly called DHL to make a claim, and they said they would investigate. After several days, they came back saying they were sorry, but unable to locate the roll of paintings, and they believe it probably was stolen in Haiti. This was unacceptable to me to immediately put the blame on the Haitians. I learned the shipping route that the box traveled, and I believe it broke somewhere in the U.S. at one of the two DHL terminals. For weeks, I called and talked with different people, and they said they were searching through the warehouses, but it didn't look good. The roll was not labeled, and being separated from the box, it would be difficult to identify.

I felt sick at the news and lost hope that the paintings would be found. How was I going to tell these 14 painters that the paintings they worked so hard to create were missing and possibly stolen? I knew how their families sacrificed basic necessities such as food to eke out funds to buy canvas and paint. I knew how they were counting on the sales for their income. I was fully aware of the economic downturn and

inflation of almost 38%, and how the Haitians were struggling to survive. Now I had to give them more bad news – another blow. This was the straw that broke my back, and I simply wept. How can everything go wrong in this country to these dear people, who have suffered so much over the years and try so hard to simply survive. I had been ardently praying for help for Haiti for 5 years, as I watched the country be overcome with gang violence and political insecurity, only to slowly watch it decline. I read the news every day of the endless suffering of the people, of famine hitting over 50% of the population of close to 12 million, with the children being the most vulnerable. I heard the cries of help from our friends in Haiti as life became more difficult, almost unbearable. Now the loss of their paintings. Is God listening to the cries of the people? Is God listening to my ardent prayers? I was feeling angry. What do we do when prayers seem to be unanswered over a long period of time? How do we cope with endless bad news in our lives?

I tried to come up with a plan of compensation for the lost art, where I would not share the news with the artists, and slowly over the next few years pay for the art. But I thought better of it, knowing that sharing the truth is always the best course of action. I started making calls. I called the first artist named Eliphete, and his reaction was so kind and understanding. He said, “It’s okay, Madame; it’s not your fault; you tried.” One by one a similar response came from those I could reach. I had imagined they would be angry and want to be compensated for their loss. But that was hardly the case. Their response was one of acceptance without blame. I was overwhelmed with a sense of relief at this outpouring of grace from the painters, and I realized at that moment that perhaps God had answered my prayers – not in the way that I prayed for, but in the overwhelming kindness, grace, and love of the artists. Their response was a great gift to me, and I thought about other instances when God’s response to our prayers is not what we hoped for, but is a gift of grace, love, and acceptance that helps us get through the challenging chapters in our journey in life.

I thought a lot about my feelings during this period as I went from anger that was transformed by grace, and I thought about this transformation and came up with four helpful lessons that I wish to share with you.

The first is that truthful conversation, no matter how difficult, is always a better course of action. So many times, we try to get around the hard job of facing reality, of speaking the truth. We put it off, imagining the worse, or we think about altering the facts in such a way that it feels better for us, and perhaps easier for others. We argue with ourselves that it is better this way, kinder not to share the reality of the situation, thinking it would be too hard for the hearer to bear. But in this experience, truthful sharing brought about an overwhelming sense of grace. Who doesn’t want to hear during hard times in our lives the words, “It’s okay, it’s not your fault, you tried.” I can think of many times in my life that these words were very much needed, and I never heard them. My relief and gratefulness for the painters’ kindness was a blessing for them as well. I have helped them sell their art for 15 years, and here they extended to me the gift of kindness and understanding, in a way that deepened our relationship and I was so grateful.

This leads to the second lesson – God answers our prayers in unexpected ways. No one can tell us how God functions in the world. God is love, and we must always hold that thought when we pray. God is for us and not against us. In our scripture lesson this morning, Matthew encourages us to ask and search for God’s help, knock on God’s door and our requests will be answered. He states, “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” He then compares God’s love to a parent’s love, saying “If you then, who are imperfect, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.” Parents respond to their children through love, and God works in the same way. Many

times, answers to our prayers are through the transformation of the heart – our heart and others – it is a change of heart. We have heard this throughout our life when someone had a ‘change of heart’ that brought about a positive action. Or, perhaps, we suddenly look at a problem in a different way, or we find a new understanding of an old issue, these are all forms of grace, ways in which God answers our prayers.

We see this with Jesus as he prays in Gethsemane. Agitated that his disciples cannot stay awake, Jesus departs from them and throws himself on the ground in despair saying, “Father, for you all things are possible, remove this cup from me, yet, not what I want, but what you want.” Here Jesus is praying for God’s help because he knows what will come in the next few days. He asks his Father to intervene, yet the answer to his prayer is not a release of his reality, but rather a transformation, perhaps an acceptance to his reality and an acknowledgment that God is with him and God’s Will will be done. We learn from this that God may not give us what we ask for, but God always gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, the God within us, the one gift we must be open to receiving. That openness many times comes with prayer.

This leads to the third lesson that we should never give up on praying, even if it seems that God is not listening or that our prayers are not making any difference. We are not the judge of the effectiveness of our prayers, especially when we pray for others. How do we know the transformative work of God even within us. Prayer is a powerful tool to reshape our lives and others. Henri Nouwen, a 20th century theologian and teacher, writes in his book, “Bread for the Journey,” that sometimes we experience a “spiritual dryness” in our spiritual lives, where we feel no desire to pray, we don’t experience God’s presence, we may stop attending church, and even begin to question our faith. (July 29 meditation). I think we all have had periods of time when we are down and experiencing “spiritual dryness.” I had these feelings through the fall and the first 4 months of this year, with all the terrible news in Haiti, Gaza, Ukraine, and the Sudan and with the death of my father, the death of David Good and other dear friends who passed away. There didn’t seem to be much to rejoice in. But Nouwen writes that “these feelings and thoughts are just feelings and thoughts, and that the Spirit of God dwells beyond our feelings and thoughts.” It does not mean God is absent, in fact it may mean we are being called to greater faithfulness and to a new higher level of spirituality and that we should continue to pray during these low times. Jesus teaches us throughout the Gospels that we should always pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1).

And this leads us to the fourth and final lesson. That we must have trust in God’s promise to us as represented in the image of the new Heaven and the new Earth in the book of Revelation. The writer writes, “See the home of God is with mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.. See I am making all things new.” These words suggest that the New Heaven and the New Earth are a work in progress, and not a finished plan. A work that we must participate in through our thoughts, prayers, and deeds. Although it seems as if we are taking steps backward lately, we cannot lose hope in the small progress that we make. Henri Nouwen writes that we should “rejoice in the little light we carry and not ask for the great beam that would take all the shadow away.” (January 8)

We also need to trust one another as brothers and sisters in God’s beloved family. I doubted the reaction of the artists to the news of the lost paintings. I believed their reaction would be one of anger. I didn’t realize that there had developed between us over the years a deep friendship of trust and love and not simply a transactional relationship of marketing their items. Otherwise, why would I have felt so passionately about the loss of their paintings and why would they have responded with such kindness if

the relationship between us was not one of respect and love. We must try to trust one another and have confidence in one another and strive to always be trustworthy.

Now back to my story of the missing paintings... close to a month after the paintings were said to be missing, Ted and I were just ready to sit down for dinner on a December evening. We heard a vehicle drive up the driveway. Being at night, Ted and I both went to the front door to see who had come. It was a DHL van. A young man jumped out, opened the back of the van and put down a heavy box by the door. Could it be? I asked the young man to wait while we opened it. He could sense my excitement. We opened the box and inside was a large roll of paintings!! After hugging Ted, I asked the driver if I could give him a hug too, and he agreed. I wanted to jump up and down. We shared the story with the driver, and he felt very happy that he delivered such a special package to us. We wished him a Merry Christmas, and he went on his way. To this day after many inquiries, I still do not know where the paintings were found, but I am sure they were not found in Haiti.

David and Corinne Good followed the saga of the missing paintings, and when they were found and delivered to us, David said the news made Corinne so happy, he wanted to buy one of the paintings for her for Christmas, because he said the story of the paintings being found gave them both such hope. The painting on the cover of the bulletin is the painting they bought at Christmas time that hangs in the house today.

In the end, my prayer for the paintings to be found was answered, and so it is possible for miracles to happen too. But I will never forget the great gift of grace received from the artists, and the lessons I learned during a period of "spiritual dryness:" the importance of truthful conversations, the transformative way that God answers our prayers, the importance to never stop praying, especially during times of 'spiritual dryness,' and to trust in God and each other. For these reminders I am truly grateful. Amen.

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