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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Matthew 7: 7-11; 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10
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Ask, Seek, Knock: On Learning to Say “Help!”

I stand before you this morning bearing a tale of hardship and woe! But I also stand before you this morning bearing a tale of inspiration and hope. Before launching into that tale, however, I wish to center ourselves within a sacred text from the writings of John and Paul...and George and Ringo. Here are the lyrics to a song most of you probably know:

When I was a younger, so much younger than today
I never needed anybody's help in any way
But now those days are gone
I'm not so self assured
And now I find I've changed my mind
And opened up the doors.
Help me if you can, I'm feeling down
And I do appreciate you being 'round
Help me get my feet back on the ground
Won't you please, please help me!

It's a very simple and perhaps common lesson that the Beatles are describing, but it's also one that's difficult to learn. In fact, it's a lesson that's central to most theologies worthy of the name. For centuries, theologians and philosophers, to say nothing of ordinary people trying to make it through the day, have struggled to come to terms with the realization that we are not self-sufficient or, as a New England sage once put it, self-reliant beings in our journey through this world. We're dependent, frequently forced to acknowledge our limits. We're a bundle of needs, reliant upon the goodness of others to see us through. In contrast to a dominant strain of U.S. thought, which runs from Emerson in its noblest articulation and to Ayn Rand at its sleaziest, human beings are far more vulnerable than we might wish, far more helpless than we might care to admit, and far more weak than we might project in our public facades. In the Christian tradition, as I understand it, to come to that realization, as John, Paul, George and Ringo learned, is to discover our hidden strength. For, as the Apostle Paul tells us, it is when we are weak that we become most strong, when we are vulnerable that we become most assured, and when we are at a loss that a hidden power, the powerless power of God, makes itself known.

But let me tell you this story of woe. I offer it as an example of what it is to encounter one's limits, one's powerlessness, and of the strength that comes when we seek help, and then, blessedly, receive it. Here's the story.

It begins several weeks ago, when Rachael surprised me for a milestone birthday with a quick trip out to Colorado, for a few days of backpacking in the Rockies. There are few things I love more than putting a pack on my back and spending time with friends in those mountains. Now, I had been fairly sedentary this summer, and so almost immediately upon arrival I felt the effects of the elevation. I was slower and a little more winded than the friends who had joined me. That might also have been from the 50 rocks they made me carry in my pack, one for each year of my - apparently - heavily burdened life. Relief came in the form of trivia questions. When I got a question correct, I could remove a rock. I'm sorry to report that I only ever got one or two questions right, and so the rocks remained. It was all in good fun, but as we hiked a creeping fatigue hovered around me.

On the third day, I woke up after a terrible night of sleep, dehydrated and with a screaming headache. We were at 10,000 feet that night, and the elevation was more punishing than I had

experienced before. But a few ibuprofen and some coffee helped, and so we set off to climb to the top of Mt. Yale - a peak I had climbed in a different form years ago in New Haven. This peak, however, stood at 14,199 feet, and I felt every one of those feet, pulling ourselves to the top. Then, once we had tagged the peak, we hustled down the mountain to shower up, eat, and then to catch a red eye out of Denver.

Weirdly, the lower elevation and the absence of rocks in my pack didn't make me feel better. In fact, I started to feel worse. By the time I got on the plane, I couldn't stop shaking. A theory began to emerge in my mind, one that helped to explain the torpor I had felt in a place that usually energized me, and so I put on a mask. It was a long night, but eventually I made it to Hartford, where Rachael picked me up. Once there, I took a test, and found that it wasn't a bag full of rocks that had me feeling off, but a nasty little outbreak of Covid. And so upstairs I went, to our spare bedroom, where I wrapped myself in blankets and fell into a deep sleep.

Two days later, Rachael announced that she too was feeling off, getting progressively worse as the day went on. She tested, and of course, she had gotten it too. And here's where everything went sideways. That was a Saturday. Not 36 hours later, we were scheduled to drive Sabina to college to help her move in. Except that now, both of her parents were huddled under blankets, feverish, unable to do much of anything.

So bundle this all together. Sabina's departure was an event that we had been preparing for, and kind of dreading, all summer. For months, both Rachael and I had gotten teary in random moments just thinking about it, even as we wanted to find ways to mark it and celebrate it as the huge threshold moment that it was for her, but really for our whole family. But then suddenly, neither of us were in a position to help her pack. We couldn't drive her to college. We couldn't help her move in. We were both trapped in our rooms, sick, sad, and unsure what to do.

I'm proud to say that it was Elsa who devised a solution. It was she who reached out to her grandmother, Rachael's mom Sandra. It was Elsa who said, "Um, we need help!" Then she told Rachael to expect a call from her mom.

After that, the pieces fell into place. Sabina and Elsa would get up early on Monday and drive to Ithaca together. It was the farthest that Sabina had ever driven. Sandra would meet them on campus and help them set the room up. She and Elsa would stay in a hotel that night, and then the following day, when Rachael and I felt a tiny bit better and were slightly less contagious, we would follow, staying in an Airbnb that allowed us to quarantine. That way we would be able to see Sabina, even if we remained masked and a little bit distant.

And so that's what we did. The girls drove off alone, and Rachael and I stood on the driveway in the early morning, stunned that we weren't able to go along, but also proud of them. We felt heartbroken all that day and into the next, realizing that we had just missed one of the most significant life moments that parents share with their children. We had waited for it. We had prepared for it emotionally. We had dreaded it. But we missed it, through no fault of our own. We weren't there.

But other people were. Elsa was there. Rachael's mom was there. Sabina herself showed up in a way that was remarkable to witness. She didn't get Covid in her first weeks, and she seems to be thriving, because people showed up to help. But other people showed up too to cover the emotional parts. Many of you shared your own experiences when you said goodbye to your children, and many others of you shared a kind ear. We felt surrounded by a community of care and understanding that helped make the whole experience, stressful as it was, a little more bearable. When we had to say goodbye, when we drove away, and when we arrived home at an emptier house, we did so with the knowledge that others in this community were doing the same thing, or had done the same thing in years past. And somehow that made everything just a little bit better. Throughout the whole episode, we had the help we needed.

So now let me transition. I'd like to offer three ways this story opens to other parts of our existence, three gateways we might walk through. The first comes from one of our Scripture lessons this morning. Ask and it shall be given to you, Jesus says. Seek and you shall find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. I don't know about you, but too often, I try to solve whatever difficulties I face by

myself, so that I don't have to ask for much of anything at all, from people but also from God. And again, quite often, I find that I don't seek much at all, because I don't perceive that I'm in need. And so there's not much that I find. And still further, I often prefer not to knock on doors that are closed to me, preferring instead the avenues that are not blocked. Thankfully, my daughter has sensed a different way. She knew when to ask, how to seek, and where to knock. When we learn those things, help does tend to arrive. Conversely, when people come to us in need, for the most part, our natural instinct is to do what we can to help. But as often as not, we have to ask, seek, knock, because otherwise, no one knows the need is there. I actually think that's how we encounter God. Not in flashes of revelation, usually, and not in visionary appearances, but in the ordinary goodness that tends to happen whenever we ask, whenever we seek, and whenever we knock.

The second opening has to do with our imagination of the public good in this country. One of the books I read this summer was a history of neoliberal economics, called *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*. And it charts the dismantling of public programs designed to help and protect the most vulnerable among us, while freeing up the wealthiest individuals to accumulate even more. Much of that dismantling took place under the insistence that individuals stand alone in society, and that their fortunes, for better or worse, are tied to their own efforts toward success. Any kind of help, from affirmative action to social safety nets, and from labor protections to health care assistance, was seen as giving help to those who weren't deserving. We're now living through a deeply unstable era because people from all sorts of backgrounds and ethnicities have had their lives rendered precarious by that isolating ideology. Our collective future depends upon our ability to rebuild a society that gives and receives aid, one that answers cries of help for things like housing, a living wage, health care, education, debt relief, and prison reform with bold and generous measures, rooted in an understanding of the vulnerabilities that we all share as human beings. In public policy as well as our personal lives, help shouldn't be a bad word. It should be reframed as a signal of the strength that emerges from being bound to others when we own up to our shared fragility.

Third and finally, I want to mention an endeavor that we'll be undertaking around here during the coming year. Over the last year and a half, our Trustees have been talking about how to meet a budget shortfall that, on paper, can look pretty scary. We are, I think, a remarkably healthy congregation. Most Sundays our pews are full, and our Sunday School is thriving. But we're not immune to the sea changes that have beset churches all across the country. A recent article in the Atlantic noted that over the past 40 years, 40 million people have simply stopped going to church, a trend that was exacerbated by Covid. Combine that with an aging population, where many of those who were able to be most generous in their pledges are no longer with us, and you can begin to see where the gap is coming from. As I say, I think we're doing well, but I also think there's a virtue to saying: help!

That's why a task force made up of our Boards has elected to work with a group called Convergence this year. They have a proven track record of helping progressive congregations, with values like ours, strengthen themselves, reaching out both internally and externally to find new avenues of growth. In the coming weeks, we'll be introducing a survey that we'd like as many people as possible to complete, and we'll be having conversations with one another about what we learn. We'll have opportunities to learn about what other communities across the country are doing to lean into the broad changes occurring within American religion, and we'll be speaking with other community leaders near and far to explore opportunities for collaborative work. It's all being done in much the same way that our family recently asked for help - it didn't come naturally, but we were better for it, stronger for it. I trust that our strength as a community will emerge from learning to speak that one difficult word: help!

I'm not exactly glad that I got Covid and that it interrupted our plans to take Sabina to college. Nor am I glad to confront a budget deficit, or the social instability that our country is now facing. It can all feel like walking with a bag of rocks in our packs, burdens that weigh us down unnecessarily. But perhaps they're each of them opportunities to learn anew the lessons of Paul and of Jesus: of strength being made perfect in weakness; of asking, seeking, and knocking; of saying, with the Beatles: won't you please, please, help me. When we do, help arrives. Help arrives.

