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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Matthew 5: 5-16; Hebrews 11: 1; 2 Corinthians 5: 7

September 8, 2024

“Religion is for Lovers”

To the welcome that you’ve already received this morning from Carleen and from Laura, let me add my own. It’s good to see so many of our families, and children, back with us after the summer, and it’s good to have the choir back as well. And for those of you who fall into neither of those categories but are back after a break, we’re really glad to see you too. I’m excited about this year and all it promises to bring. I’m also, like many of you perhaps, a tad apprehensive about the fall season, and what we may see over the next several months. But in a way, that’s exactly why I’m so glad to see all of you, and to be among you. As the old hymn has it, this place, we ourselves, and our faith in God and one another can be a shelter through whatever stormy blasts may come, a home in which we can recover and retain our bearings.

In what follows, I wish to sketch a vision that’s not so much about what we’re going to be doing or encountering this year, but rather about how we might be, and how we might approach whatever comes our way.

And the place to begin is with the phrase that forms the title of this sermon: Religion is for lovers. Church is for lovers. FCCOL is for lovers. That is to say, religion, this practice, this form of life, is for those who have been stirred by a certain passion. It is for those who are possessed by a certain longing, a stirring within their hearts for something that frequently exceeds their capacity to name it. Their hearts have been set aflame by God, which might sound a little too pious and a little too abstract for some among us. And so, following an old saying taken from Scripture itself, which famously tells us that God *is* love, perhaps we can say that religion is for those who have been called out of themselves by some vision of beauty, by some vision of justice, by some vision that places the good of the other above the self. The opposite of the religious person, in this view, isn’t an irreligious person or a secular person, but rather a loveless person, so consumed with his or her own visage - and maybe the value of their mutual funds - that love never stands a chance. If you’ve ever been in love, then maybe this is the place for you. Religion is for lovers.

Maybe we should put it a little differently. Religion is for dreamers. Church is for dreamers. FCCOL is for dreamers. It’s for those who, because of this passion burning somewhere inside of them, refuse to see people, and events, and the world itself according to the worst possibilities or tendencies that might sometimes become apparent. Religion is for the restless, for the ones who wish and hope for something like mad, and who refuse to be cowed by the sensible rationalists who say that things have always been this way, and so get used to it. Racism has always been with us, and so we may as well get used to it. The poor and the homeless have always been with us, and so don’t waste too much energy on fixing things. Israelis and Palestinians have always been in conflict, and so don’t devote too much time to imagining something other. No...religion is for dreamers. It is for those of us who still possess an imagination and a desire for a way of life where people, and animals, and the planet itself flourish together. Religion is for dreamers.

Let’s frame it differently one more time. Religion is for those who see the world slant, as Emily Dickinson famously put it, who see with different eyes than those of their neighbors. In

preparation for this Sunday, I began revisiting some of the early chapters of *Don Quixote*, a book I shall never cease reading. Those early chapters in particular are about seeing the world slant. That is to say, they are about the productive and selective misconstrual of reality, willfully choosing to see something that is not the case, in hopes that it will become so. Where some see only garbage, or miscreants, or the ignorant and low-born, Don Quixote sees the good and the noble. Where some see a dilapidated inn, the Don sees a castle. Where some see common prostitutes, the Don sees high born ladies. Where some see swineherds, the Don sees fellow knights. Where some see an emaciated old nag, Don Quixote sees a trusty steed, Rocinante. And of course where others, including Sancho Panza, see ordinary windmills, Don Quixote sees giants against whom he must test his skills. Like the Don, religious folk know how to see the world slant.

Now, there's something very charming about Don Quixote's insistence upon his heroic vision, but on this reading, I've had some misgivings about the Don's dogged insistence in seeing what only he can see. I confess that I've had some doubts about the very things I've been saying to you so far, about religion as passion, religion as dreaming, and religion as seeing slant. That's because we're living through a moment when some people think they can bend reality to their own private whims, telling people, disastrously, that what they see and what they know to be true are not actually so. We're living in a moment when reality itself is up for grabs, and where AI generated writing, music, art, everything, is suddenly surrounding us. It's made millions of us susceptible to false and specious claims, even when they're coming from live human beings. You know what I mean. Things like: "Climate change is a hoax." "Vaccines cause autism." "Eastern Ukraine belongs to Russia." "My inauguration was bigger than his." "The 2020 election was stolen." "Voter fraud is everywhere," and on it goes. In a way, it's as though Don Quixote has gone rogue, has turned sinister, so that everyone has begun to see only what they want to see, or what a few nefarious individuals - or bots - want them to see.

Of course, reality has a way of reasserting itself. Heat waves and once in a century storms keep happening, whether you believe the science or not. Covid can be deadly, whether you believe in taking vaccines or not. Legal repercussions catch up with you, whether you believe laws apply to you or not. And you and I have a role in preserving a kind of ground level base of factuality, calmly but insistently pushing back against false and damaging attempts to twist reality into something it is not. We don't get to see just anything we wish, let alone pursue just any passing love or dream that enters our heads. There are norms.

And yet. I wish to hang on to Don Quixote's stubborn vision, in the name of a certain love, in the name of a certain dream, in the name of Jesus himself. Here, I wish to transport us not to the baked plains of La Mancha, but to the hillside, the Mount, upon which Jesus gave his famous sermon. And I wish you to see, in your mind's eye, what Jesus must have seen as he looked out upon the assembled crowds. These were not, according to any scholar of the ancient Near East, the best and the brightest, having been to the finest schools in the land. They're a collection of poor Palestinian peasants, from a remote outpost of the Roman Empire, living in a forgotten corner of that remote outpost. Virgil and Ovid they are not. Very few are even literate. They smell like fish, and wood smoke, and sweat. Some are sick and a good many are malnourished. There are cheats and swindlers among them, and a few crying children too. It would have been a humble affair.

But listen to what Jesus tells them: you - the fisherman with a single tooth left in his mouth, say - you are the light of the world! And you - the woman who may turn tricks in order to buy a little bread - you are the salt of the earth! And you - the man who swindles his

neighbors gathering dues for the Romans - you are a city set upon a hill! To one and all, the fishermen and the farmers and the indigent, to all of them he says, "let your light shine - don't hide it under a basket, but let it blaze!" Then listen to what he tells them about their sorrows and their struggles: that these are secret blessings. To all of which any right thinking observer would wonder who he's referring to or what it is he actually sees, or what it is he thinks all those crowded masses are going through. It's a willful misreading of the real, worthy of Don Quixote himself. It's a willful misconstrual, in the service of a deeper real, a deeper truth, and a deeper sense of what actually is. It is to see the lives of all those gathered people through the eyes of faith rather than sight, through the eyes of the heart rather than the five empirical senses. There are some things that Jesus is entirely realistic about - what an ungoverned love of money will do to the human soul, for example, or how some versions of religion can do a person more harm than good. But about people...about people and their capacity to change and to share and to love more freely and openly, about such things he is a lover, a dreamer, a visionary.

As for us, I would have us be a community that mixes all of the characteristics I've been naming: passionate and loving, filled with dreams of human, animal, and planetary flourishing, and seeing the best even if, sometimes, we're presented with the worst. I would like for us to have one foot firmly planted in the empirical world around us, governed by facts, data, and verifiable truths. But I would also have us see with the eyes of faith, that we never become jaded by what is, and that we never settle for the injustices that are presented as inevitable.

Why am I telling you all this? Well, I can't predict the future, and I don't know what's in store over the next several months. Come what may, I want us to stand firm in our faith. I want us to ensure that the demonization of some populations - immigrants, those who need to terminate a pregnancy, the LGBTQ and especially the trans community, the Jewish or Islamic communities, Gaza and Palestinians, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Native Americans, the Chinese - I want us to ensure that such demonization has no place inside or outside these walls. I want us to look upon everyone we encounter with the eyes of faith, even those who stoop to such degradations. I would have us act and behave as if ours is a world, and yes, a democracy, worth struggling for, even when we are disappointed by it. I would have us work as if church, and community itself, were worthy of our greatest efforts, because, well, they are. I would have us be lovers, dreamers, gazing upon the world with the eyes of Jesus, and maybe Don Quixote too.

We're going to close by doing something that might push us right up to the edge of cheesiness, but I think it'll be worth taking such a risk. I'm a lover, you see, and a dreamer! The deacons are going to distribute song sheets, and we're going to sing together, because singing together is always a hopeful thing. While they do that, I'll tell you a story. When I was about four years old, our family was still living in California, and my parents were contemplating a move across the country, to Pennsylvania. One week, my mom flew to Pennsylvania with my then infant brother for a job interview, while my dad and I stayed behind. On one of our evenings together, he took me to see a film, one that I've never forgotten, and that still somehow structures my imagination, maybe not unlike Don Quixote and Sancho and Jesus. It was a film about a road trip, where several friends set out across the country looking for a new home, with the vision of "doing something that will make people happy" - giving them joy. Along the way, they're chased by some pretty unsavory characters, and they face more than a few setbacks. But they never give up on their vision. They're led by a singer, who also happens to be an eternal optimist, one who wishes the best for everyone, and somehow, in that belief, seems to draw out the best. The film opens with a song that I still love, because it captures something valuable

about life, and especially the life of faith: that it's made for lovers and dreamers who can't help but follow a vision that sometimes only they, only we, can see. The singer was green, and he was a frog, and his friends were hippies and eccentrics. They've been heroes of mine ever since, and I still wish to get on their bus. The film was *The Muppet Movie*, of course, which never gets old, and the song was "The Rainbow Connection." It captures what it is to hold onto goodness, even when things get a little weird.

Would you sing it with me? Get over your inhibitions and just embrace the moment. Sean is going to lead us, and you now have the words. May it be a reminder of the simple goodness we're all trying to hold onto. May it be an invitation to see through the eyes of faith, which is to say, to look for the best, even when such things are hard to see.

Religion...the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme...is for lovers and dreamers, all of us under a spell. Let's sing.