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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Psalm 30: 1-12; Ezekiel 37: 1-6
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‘Keeping the Dance Alive’

Back in 1991, in the early years of our partnership with the Lakota community at Green Grass, David Good preached a sermon entitled “It’s Hard to Dance When You’re Stuck in the Mud.” It’s one of the outstanding sermons contained in the collection *A Place of Grace*, copies of which we have available. He begins by invoking the Ghost Dance, a ceremonial dance performed by Lakota men and women toward the end of the 19th century. The Ghost Dance was a practice that blended both Indigenous and Christian ways of thinking, born of the belief among some Lakota that if they could dance long enough and well enough their suffering would come to an end. The losses and hurts of the past would be healed, there would be food enough for everybody, and the ceaseless persecution of their communities would end. It was the Ghost Dance that Lakota men, women, and children were performing in 1890, when U.S. soldiers opened fire at Wounded Knee. Some 300 people were slaughtered that bitter day, and it remains one of the sorriest episodes in all of U.S. history, something for which the U.S. has never apologized or atoned.

David went on to weave reflections about the mud travelers from FCCOL encountered on their journey that year, and how the mud clung to their boots and shoes and tires, making all forms of travel difficult. The mud became a metaphor of the history that continues to cling to us, up to the present day. It became an image for how our various communities can become stuck in terrible and tragic patterns laid out centuries ago by those who came before us. It became an image for the many discouragements and frustrations that they, and we in Old Lyme, were then experiencing.

The dance, by contrast, became an image for the possibility of healing and partnership. When there’s so much mud clinging to you, it helps to have a partner in the dance, David said. It helps to know that someone cares. It helps when someone else dances with you.

It’s a brilliant sermon, and I thought of it often when our small group of travelers visited Green Grass this past June. We were Ginny Speirs, Dan Renn, Carolyn Randall, Jolene Brant, Susan Switzer, and me - a dream team as far as I was concerned. It had been five years since anyone from Old Lyme had visited Green Grass, and we wondered just what remained of our partnership, what remained of our dance. Many of the elders from Green Grass who once anchored our relationship there are no longer with us. Many of those who anchored that relationship from Old Lyme, like David himself, are no longer with us. What remained of the sacred dance of our partnership, we wondered, and were there ways to keep the dance alive?

All of us, I think, were haunted by a dance of various ghosts during our visit. These were the memories, or for some of us, the stories we had heard, of all the scenes that had played out between our communities over the years. I recalled the three previous visits I had made with members of our church. I missed the swirling energy of people visiting, of meals being cooked and served, of children playing and of repairs being made to the church facility at Green Grass. I missed the karaoke and the horse rides, the buying and the selling of crafts, and the reunion of old friends. Beyond that I sensed the layers of history, some dating back to 1985, that Ginny and Dan and Susan had experienced long before my arrival in Old Lyme. Was there a way to create such scenes again? Was the dance of partnership that David described all those years ago still a movement, a choreography, that our communities could perform together?

It’s not an easy question. There is no longer a worshipping community at the Green Grass church, and the building itself has fallen into disrepair. And there aren’t as many people hanging

around Green Grass these days. Even so, we found a remnant of our old friends scattered about - Manny Redbear foremost among them, but also Naomi Kasto, and her extended family. We spent a lot of time visiting with the matriarchs who continue to reside at Green Grass, renewing our friendships with them. We cared for Travis Harden in his final days. And throughout it all, we felt the stirring of an old flame in our hearts, a passion for these relationships, and all that they might yet become. Speaking for myself, I felt some of the mud shaking loose from my own feet, as the dance, halting and uneven, but steady all the same, began to move us once again.

I'll let Dan speak about his impressions, and then I'll close with an image, followed by a proposal.

(Dan Renn)

Shortly after returning from Green Grass this summer, I had the opportunity to read Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, a gorgeous piece of writing about time and loss and human connection. In the middle of the novel, there's a 30 page stretch of the story that is told from the perspective of a house that is unvisited by the family that owns it for a number of crucial years. Very small things happen over those years that begin to take a toll on the structure: a creature finds its way inside and makes a home, a storm blows off a shutter, a leak springs through the roof. And little by little the house deteriorates, to the point that, eventually, it is on the brink of ruin. Here's what Virginia Woolf writes:

Now had come that moment, that hesitation, when dawn trembles and night pauses, when if a feather alight in the scale it will be weighed down. One feather, and the house, sinking, falling, would have turned and pitched downwards to the depths of darkness.

She then continues:

But there was a force working; something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched; something that inspired (a few) to go about (their) work with dignified ritual or solemn chanting.

She's speaking about a slow process of recovery in the house, where, because of the care and attention given to the place, it comes back from the brink, and life returns to it again. It's not the same life as before. Time's passage is irrevocable. But it is life, and it is good.

"But there was a force working." I like that phrase. And I wonder if it, along with that description of the house coming back to life, might be an image of our partnership at Green Grass. We're at a moment where the feather might alight and tip the scale, pushing our partnership into the irretrievable past. Or where, through our attention and care, we might revive and restore this long-standing relationship, carefully constructed across so many years. But there was a force working...

Might that force be something like the Spirit of God, moving through us, moving through our friends at Green Grass? Might that have been what was happening among our small band of travelers as we visited old friends this past summer? Might it be akin to the Spirit that moved through the valley of dry bones in the book of Ezekiel, bringing something on the brink of collapse back to life? I believe in such a force with all of my being, and I believe it's at work in

² Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, (New York: Knopf Publishers, Everyman Edition, 1991), pg. 158. Originally published in 1927.

³ Ibid, pg. 159.

all kinds of different areas of our lives - in our spiritual lives, but in our families too, in our communities and relationships and even in the natural world. It's a force that requires our participation in order to be effective. But when we participate in it, when we do lend our care and attention to something or someone, it can restore what otherwise might be lost.

And so here is my proposal, my great wish. Our team laid the groundwork for a larger group from FCCOL to return to Green Grass in June of 2025. I would love if some of our younger families might consider making the journey this year. We plan to have activities for kids while we're out there. And I would love if those of you who have been to Green Grass before might consider returning, or if some others of you might consider coming for the first time to see this remarkable place, a site of so much beauty, but also a crucible for so much pain. And I wonder if there might be a few others of you who would serve as an advance team, going out a few days early, to clean up the church, and to give it a little more life so that we might gather there once again. While we're there, we envision having a celebration, where we invite everyone around to come for a ceremony, where we would honor all of those, now gone, who poured themselves into this incredible partnership - David Good, but also Henry Good Bear and Eunice Larabie, Phil and Judy Simmons, but also Travis Harden and Ira Blue Coat, and Grace Kasto. I envision food, and lots of laughter. But maybe most of all, I envision dancing. Our partnership is a dance, and it is worth keeping alive.

At the end of David's sermon from 1991, he returns to the Ghost Dance, and to the soldiers that opened fire at Wounded Knee. And he imagines an alternate version of that terrible event, where somehow, miraculously, the soldiers put down their guns and joined in the dance.

It's a vision that we're still trying to enact. Won't some of you come, and help us to keep this beautiful dance alive?