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Texts: Jeremiah 29: 11; Matthew 6: 19-21; Philippians 2: 12  
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### For Where Your Heart Is...

Today I'd like to speak in the most personal terms about what this community means to me. We're talking about stewardship today, obviously, and so it feels appropriate to tell you why I care about FCCOL and its future. But I have other reasons for speaking as I do. It's been more than 11 years since our family arrived in Old Lyme, and I've been in a reflective mood lately about the passing of those years. Perhaps it stems from the fact that our oldest daughter departed for college this year. It may have to do with the passing of so many members of this community during the last year that I've come to know and love. Whatever the reasons for my reflective mood, I've been reminded anew of just why I love FCCOL, and why I was attracted to it in the first place. To get at that, I need to take you back quite a few years into my childhood, and so bear with me.

Many of you know something of my story already. For better and sometimes for worse, I was raised in churches, and many of my most formative experiences as a child took place in faith communities. In some ways, that was good - I felt known and loved in the churches we attended, and I can think of adults all along the way who demonstrated care and affection for me. But there were times, in some of those churches, when I felt as though I was being asked to wear a suit of clothes that didn't quite fit. The beliefs, the doctrines, the way we saw the world - it was as though these were pants, and a shirt, and a jacket that chafed and rubbed against my skin. And anyway, the suit, the beliefs about Jesus and God and all the rest, it wasn't really my own.

I was baptized at the age of 12, in a church where accepting Jesus into your heart was an important step toward salvation. Before I was plunged into the water, I had to share just when I had made the decision to accept Jesus. The truth was, I had never known anything else, and I couldn't have said where or when I had made such a decision. And so I made something up, using borrowed language and a more or less invented experience that I knew would conform to the expectations of the community around me. In other words, I put on a suit of clothes that was not really mine.

I continued to rely on that borrowed language throughout adolescence, and well into college. But then something happened. It wasn't a moment of conversion, but of de-conversion. I was working with an evangelical outreach program that went into local high schools to share our faith. And on a retreat for leaders of that program, I watched another leader, several years older than me, conduct a seminar on how to run a Bible study for young people. And I was amazed, because he sort of dressed like me. He talked like me, with similar inflections. He used the same language and analogies that I did. At some level, that's true for all of us - none of us invents language wholesale, and we're forced to borrow our ways of seeing the world from the sources that are available to us. But this went deeper. His personal experiences of faith were almost identical to mine. It was as though I were confronting my own doppelganger, and suddenly, as if I had been struck by a bolt of lightning, I realized that my own deepest experiences of faith were constructions, handed to me as if ready-made. It's not that my

inner world was a lie. It was more that it was never quite mine in the first place. To return to the earlier metaphor, it was a suit, but it didn't really belong to me.

For a while after that, I found it difficult to go to church, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be a part of an institution that seemed to produce such conformity. Nor did I want to be a part of an institution that enforced a kind of thinking that, as I matured, came to feel more and more narrow, and sometimes very arrogant. And yet I still found myself attracted to certain features of the Christian story. I was drawn to Jesus, the human Jesus, who seemed far more comfortable around those who weren't always certain what they believed. I was attracted to some of the courageous people that had been shaped by the church, who had gone on to model a different and non-conformist kind of faith - leaders from the Black church, and radical priests from Latin America, and feminist and queer theologians who were rebuilding the Christian story from the ground up, so that faith would be less exclusionary, less narrow, less authoritarian. I went to Yale Divinity School to continue thinking about these things, and it was there that I began to wonder if there might be a different kind of church out there, even as I remained more than a little wary.

At a certain point, I was learning more about the Presbyterian church, which is very similar to that of the Congregationalists. And in the Presbyterian Book of Order, I discovered some words that were handed down from the 17th century, words that changed everything for me. It's a statement that I shared on one of my first Sundays in this pulpit. Here's what it said:

“God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of (people) which are in anything contrary to God's Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. Therefore,” it continues, “we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable.”

That's what the Book of Order said, but here's what I heard: “It is neither necessary nor desirable to put on clothes - doctrines, beliefs, outlooks about the world - that do not fit, and that do not belong to you, that do not accord with your own experience.” I encountered a freedom in those words that gave me license to explore, to experience contradictions, and to come to my own conclusions about what and who God and Jesus were, and what it had to do with my life. It was, as the Apostle Paul said, the freedom, given to each of us, to work out our own salvation, which is to say, our own life pathway, with fear and trembling.

Let me jump forward now to the spring of 2013. It was on an overcast Sunday in March of that year that Rachael and I slipped into the back of the Meetinghouse for a stealth visit. I had already had several conversations with the search committee, and I knew that there was something going on here that was immensely attractive. I was especially drawn to the bold partnerships and advocacy this church engaged in, in Palestine, Haiti, and other places. But imagine how gladdened I was when I started reading the bulletin that Sunday, and discovered words that were very similar to those I had found in the Presbyterian Book of Order. They are words you can still find in your bulletins today: “Each member shall have the undisturbed right to follow the word of God according to the dictates of their own conscience, under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.” Upon leaving the Meetinghouse that day, I found the very same words emblazoned upon the wall of the narthex, words that I soon found out had been equally meaningful to my predecessor, David Good, when he first arrived at FCCOL. It's true, in a way it is more ready-made language. But it serves as a license toward creativity, boldness and freedom that I experience as a gift.

They were words that helped me to know that I was in the right place. They were words that helped me to trust that here was a church that valued not ready-made constructions of faith, but one that valued the life journey and life experiences of each individual that walks through the door. They were words that helped me to trust that here, one could be oneself, however idiosyncratic, without fear of judgment or ostracism.

It's also not to say that anything goes around here - there are some things about which the body of Christ is called to say no. As we've lately had to learn, through successive upheavals in our country and around the world, not every spirit will lead us toward mature lives of faith. Not every spirit will lead us toward lives filled with grace, compassion, and an encompassing love. Not every spirit is holy. But there's an awful lot of leeway here, and an openness that I had been searching for my entire adult life. And so, a few weeks later when the search committee called to invite me to become the senior minister of FCCOL, I didn't have any hesitation. I immediately said yes.

Since that time, we've shared many experiences that have given form and substance to my life, and maybe to yours as well. Those experiences have helped me, and maybe you too, to live into a faith that is yours alone, mine alone, while also drawing us together through some shared common values. Together, we've welcomed refugee families ever since Syria imploded in 2015, and together we've done our best to enlarge the scope of hospitality in Old Lyme. Together, we shared the experience of providing families with Sanctuary when they were threatened with deportation, and together we encouraged one another through the difficult days of Covid lockdowns. Together, we've explored the tangled history of enslavement and racism here in Old Lyme and beyond, allowing ourselves to be chastened, and hopefully made a little more conscious about our own responsibility to create a more just world. Some of us have shared tears in places like the West Bank and Green Grass. We've danced in the aisles to Cuban drums. We've mourned together when we've lost those we love. We've puzzled through passages of the Bible together. We've prayed and we've sung and we've broken bread, and we've stayed up half the night listening to and reading Dante. Together.

Jesus said that where your treasure is, there will your heart be also, meaning, I suppose, that the things we accumulate or value reveal where our priorities lie. But I think the reverse is also true. Where your heart is, there shall you store what it is that you treasure. I can only tell you what is true for me, but I want you to know that my heart lies here. I want you to know that my heart is in this place, with all of you.

Though I can't capture in monetary terms what FCCOL means to me, as an expression of our gratitude - and I offer this with a little fear and trembling - Rachael and I have pledged \$3300 this year to the work of this church. At times, that feels like a lot, given the educational debts that we've accrued in order to enter our respective vocations, and given the more recent financial burden of college tuition. But much of the time, it feels like far too little, given the blessings that I, and that we, have received from being a part of this community.

We're living in a time in which ready-made suits, composed of handed down language, beliefs, ideologies, and images, are being handed out everywhere. They're handed out on TV, on social media, and very often, in churches. It's what the novelist Milan Kundera called "the non-thought of received ideas." I don't know about you, but I find it deeply unsettling. Here at FCCOL, we're trying to do something different. We're trying to listen to our own life stories, in such a way that our faith grows from who we are deep down, rather than being something superficial that we put on. We are taking Paul's admonition seriously, that we must each work out our own salvation, our own life path, with the freedom but also the responsibility that

entails. And it means trusting, to come at last to the words of Jeremiah - trusting that we ourselves and that this community have before us a future filled with great things still to come, plans for our flourishing and not for harm. That can be hard to trust these days, but you help me to believe that it's so.

My heart is here. Therefore, a portion of my treasure is too. It's an expression of gratitude for having been invited to live and think and grow in your company. And though your story, and your conclusions, and your commitment, will be different than mine, I hope you'll spend time thinking about what FCCOL means to you, and how you might contribute to the life of this community. I hope that your heart is here as well, and that this place is worthy of a portion of your treasure too. Amen.