

Steve Jungkeit  
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
Text: Genesis 49: 29-33, 50:4-8, 12-14  
January 28, 2024

### Finding Our Way Home

There is a great deal that I wish to share with you about Africa, stories and insights that can't be covered in the space of a single week. I'll share some of those insights very soon. This week, given our annual meeting, it seemed important to step back a little bit, in order to reflect on the year that we have passed as a community, and to look ahead to what might be in store in the future. It's been an incredibly full year, filled with a lot of important events and learnings. There was our immersion into Dante but also into Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot - we'll be continuing in that vein throughout this winter and spring. There was our land acknowledgment, and the service of dedication that followed, partnering with our Nehantic neighbors. There was a Tree of Life journey to Palestine, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, and a journey to New Orleans as well. There was our Juneteenth celebration, in which more Witness Stones were dedicated around Old Lyme, and when Afro-Cuban musicians shared a piece of their religious practice with us. There was the White Elephant Sale, the All Saints Weekend, the Christmas Pageant, the Breakfast Run for the young people, and yes, a journey to Ghana, Togo, and Benin. It's been a full and a very powerful year here at FCCOL.

But there's something else that's been true of this year, something that, for me, will define 2023: it was the year of funerals. It began right away last January, when Doris King died, and then it reached a crescendo in the fall, when we started doing two, three, and sometimes up to five funerals almost every week. In truth, it hasn't really let up. Last week alone, we conducted four funerals for various members and friends. I would be lying if I said it didn't take an emotional toll, certainly on the three of us as ministers. If that's true of us, I know it must also be true for many of you, who have lost those that you've loved. But even if you haven't been directly affected, I tend to think those losses have an impact on all of us. There are empty spaces in our pews. Empty chairs at LBS luncheons and potlucks. There are absences around us that, whether we were personally acquainted with each of those individuals or not, have a kind of ripple effect on the entire community.

I know it might be a downer to focus on all those losses, but I thought it might be helpful to reflect on how we might approach such a reality as individuals, and as a community. What wisdom might we gain from facing into these multiple losses, and how might we use a moment such as this to orient ourselves toward what matters most in our lives? To get at those questions, I'd like to offer broad truths that have emerged for me over the past several months. One is born from Scripture. One is born from history. And one is born from a story shared with me recently by one of our members who is confronting his own mortality. Taken together, each can provide insights into the kind of people we're trying to be, and the kind of community we're trying to become.

Here's the first insight: the book of Genesis concludes with the death of Jacob. It's a moving story, where, just prior to his death, Jacob instructs his son, Joseph, to bury him in the place that he thinks of as home, where Abraham and Sarah were buried, and where Isaac and Rebecca were buried. It's not just the place - he wants to be buried alongside the people who

represent home to him. And so when the time comes, Joseph and a whole entourage make their way north from Egypt, and they lay Jacob to rest in the place that he designated.

It's a very significant way to end the book. Genesis opens, more or less, with the creation of the first human, Adam, from the dust of the earth. But the book concludes with a burial, in which a person is returned to that earth. It's an arc that is actually telling us something fundamental about what it means to be a human being. The very word "human" comes from the word meaning earth, or soil: *humus*. Somewhere in the development of language and culture, the meaning of "human" came to be associated with those who return to the soil. In other words, humans are those who bury their dead.<sup>1</sup> You can think of Sophocles' great play *Antigone* in that regard, where the hinge of the entire play has to do with whether Creon will allow Antigone to bury her brother Polynices. There is, to be sure, a concern about the eternal fate of Polynices, but it's also a concern for the living. To be in possession of this thing called "humanity," to show humanity, to be humane, is to be among those who care for the dead. It is to be among those who accord dignity to the dead, and who take pains to honor those who have departed. Failing to do so is actually to lose one's humanity, to be returned to the world of brute animality (though of course many species of animals do in fact mourn their dead). So, an essential piece of what it means to be human is that we must contend with the fact of burial.

That's essentially, I think, what that framing in the book of Genesis is telling us: that our very humanity is dependent upon how we will come to terms with this relationship to the earth, which is to say, to burial. When you think about it, the fact that we shall return to the earth is, apart from our birth, the single thing that we share in common with every other person on this planet. We in modernity, especially those of us in North America, tend to do our utmost to evade that reality. And with good reason. It's unnerving. It's depressing. It is the source of our greatest anxiety. Think about the ultimate expression of North American cultural values, Disneyland, and all of its many spinoffs, especially in Florida. You can vacation there. You can get happy there. You can even live there. You can let Disney provide the story archetypes that burrow deep into your soul. You can let its music be the soundtrack of your life. But you can't be buried there.

Genesis hints that suppressing the fact of burial, as most of us have been trained to do in our culture, is actually to suppress an integral piece of what it is to be a creature of God. It is to become a people without a past. It is to become a people who are content to remain shallow and superficial, unacquainted with the depths. And it is to become those most devoid of compassion, for those who cannot confront the truth of burial are those who cannot see or acknowledge when others are having to walk through that lonesome valley. To be a mature and functional human, in the Greek and Hebrew tradition alike, is to be among those who grapple with this basic truth of burial. But that's not only true of the Greeks and the Hebrews. Everywhere we went in Africa, there was a deep concern with the ancestors, with how one is related to all those who have now departed. Just as an aside, when Lazaro Galarrago visited us this past June for our Juneteenth celebration, the first thing he wanted to do in Old Lyme was to visit the cemetery. As a practitioner of an African derived religious faith, the most important requirement for entering our space was to render honor to the ancestors. He was, in essence, finding his way to the core of what it means to be human. That's the first lesson I wish to draw from this unprecedented series of deaths in our community: it is a summons to claim our humanity, as spiritually mature and soulful beings.

---

<sup>1</sup> An association learned from Cornel West, in a lecture delivered at Dartmouth College, Summer 2017.

The second lesson I'd like to draw from it all comes from American history and literature. At one point during the fall, in the midst of preparing one memorial service or another, I came across an account of Walt Whitman's days during the Civil War, when he became, in essence, a minister attending to wounded and dying soldiers.<sup>2</sup> It's a series of stories recounted in his book *Specimen Days*. In 1862, Whitman went to Washington, D.C. in search of his brother, who he suspected had been wounded at the Battle of Bull Run. While he was there, he visited a hospital to see some of the other men from his brother's regiment. He stopped to talk to a boy who was groaning with pain. Whitman discovered that no one had yet examined the boy, and so he went in search of a doctor. After that, he visited a while longer. He wrote a letter to the boy's family. Then he gave him a little money to buy some milk, and when he did, the boy began to cry. And then something welled up in Whitman's soul, as if he had received a kind of divine calling. It's something that I too once felt, working in a hospital. I feel it still whenever I return to such places.

Whitman began visiting the hospital every day, a practice he continued until the conclusion of the war. He lived in a rented room, worked odd jobs, and then in the late afternoon, he would walk the wards of the hospital. He brought soup that he would ladle out to soldiers in their beds. He once brought ten gallons of ice cream, and gave it out by the spoonful. He would write letters for the men, and he would sit with them late into the night, holding their hands, talking to them, letting them know they weren't alone. Sometimes he would read out loud from novels, or from Homer or Shakespeare, and when he did, the whole ward would gather around to listen. Hospitals were such unstructured institutions in those days that Whitman even accompanied some of the men into surgery, helping to clean their wounds, and even, one time, attending to a terrified soldier during an amputation.

It was an extraordinary outpouring of soul. It's not an exaggeration to say that Whitman was a kind of secular saint. But what, really, was Whitman doing there in the midst of all that suffering? He didn't have to be there, after all. The answer, I believe, is that he was learning *how* to be human. For all the terrible things he witnessed, his self-chosen practice during the war brought Whitman closer to the quick of life. Death, Whitman discovered, can focus life, and can deepen it, for in the face of death, we're suddenly able to distinguish between the important and the trivial, the profound and the superficial. But it also helped him to get in touch with his own emotions, and his capacity to show tenderness and care. He wrote of how he was allowed to become "undisguised and naked...discarding all stiff conventions." He wrote: "the doctors tell me I supply the patients with a medicine which all their drugs and bottles and powders are helpless to yield." That medicine was, according to Whitman, "the sustenance of love." "It has saved more than one life," he wrote.

Attending to the dying taught Walt Whitman how to live. It taught him how to be human. Like Joseph returning the body of Jacob to his chosen home, Whitman's visits to the hospital returned him to another kind of home, to his own true north. It helped to clarify that what mattered most in the world was the giving and receiving of love. It helped to clarify that giving one's attention to another, especially in a time of need or loneliness, might be enough to save a person's life. His experience suggests that, as they say in New Orleans, we ain't got long to stay here, and so we had better do what we can to show our affection to those we care about. Being human, for Whitman, meant having the courage to be on friendly terms with death, which made him tender toward all of those he encountered. It's a lesson that we too might learn.

---

<sup>2</sup> The following account, including all the quotes, are found in *The Gift*, by Lewis Hyde (New York: Vintage Books, 2019), pgs. 266-270.

I have so far spoken about our own relationship with those who are dying, or who have died. I'd like now to say a word meant for those who themselves are having to face their own ending. Here, I turn to my third lesson, one offered to me in a recent pastoral care visit. It was a story from World War II, about the Battle of Midway. And it was about the pilots who took off from an aircraft carrier in the Pacific. They would fly due east for, let's say 45 minutes. At about 200 miles an hour, they were then some 150 miles away from the aircraft carrier, which of course was still moving. The pilots then dropped their payload, and at some point, they would turn around to fly back to the aircraft carrier. They had the use of some electronic instruments, of course, but mostly, the pilots had to use the sun and the stars and their own calculations to figure out how to get back "home." That was no small skill. It was something that had to be methodically taught, and practiced, so that when the moment came, the pilot wasn't hopelessly lost. It turns out that it was the father of the member I was visiting who had taught that skill. And suddenly, there in the hospice facility, it struck me that that scenario, of learning how to find our way home, is the perfect metaphor for the spiritual life, but also for learning what it is to live and to die with courage, and with grace.

You see, each of those who has gone before us - our spouses, our parents, our grandparents, our friends - it is as if they are our teachers, helping to show us our heart's true north. They show us what it is that matters most in the world. And as we confront our own mortality, as we each of us must, we have had teachers, guides who have gone before us, helping to orient us toward what is true, and good, and honorable, and just in our lives. We have had those who have helped to keep alive in us the ability to trust that, somewhere in the midst of it all, there is a God toward whom we journey, and who awaits our landing within that vast cosmic ocean. We have had teachers and guides who have taught us the coordinates, so that when it is time, we can find our way home.

And isn't that, after all, what a church finally is? It's not a building. It's not a place. It's a community of people, gathered both to teach and to learn how to find our way home - in life and in death alike. We do it by working to cut through the superficialities that we so often live with, that we might touch something that feels emotionally and spiritually real. We do it by learning over and over again that we are made to love and to be loved. We do it by learning, time and again, that our heart's true home is in God. It is a God who has promised to gather us in when our days on earth are through. But it is also a God that we encounter in Jesus, who referred to himself as "the Son of Man," which is more accurately translated as "the Human One," the One of the earth, the One of the soil, the One who buries, and is buried.

Say we're all like those planes circling the sky. A church is a gathering of those who are teaching and learning how - in life and in death - we find our way home to God.

There's nothing easy about conducting memorial services, or sitting with grieving families. There's nothing easy about saying goodbye to those we love. But I have discovered that there's grace within it. I have discovered that every time we gather for another round of goodbyes, it is an invitation to become more human. I have discovered that it is a way of reorienting ourselves around the things and the people in our lives that matter most. And I have discovered that it can be a kind of school, in which we learn to trust that we have been given the means to find our way home - home to God, and home to one another.