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Texts: Matthew 16: 13-18; I Corinthians 3: 10-13
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Revealed by Fire: Why the Institutional Church (Still) Matters,
And How It Might Help

*It is true there is not enough beauty in the world.
It is also true that I am not competent to restore it.
Neither is there candor, and here I may be of some use.*

-Louise Glück, "October"

Louise Glück published those words about a year after the September 11th attacks. She read them publicly for the first time down in New Haven, to a packed audience in the Center Church on the Green. One of America's most celebrated poets, she was responding to the shock of what had happened a year prior, confessing her inadequacy before that event, and yet offering the gift of her words all the same. A hush fell over the assembled crowd as she read, for they knew that in those words, a kind of counterforce was being launched, where something as flimsy, intangible, and weightless as a poet's words could push back the darkness, could restore some trace of spirit and transcendence to the world. Here I may be of some use, Louise Glück says.

I think coming to church is a little like that. Like the poet's words, this too, this coming together as a community, is a fragile and humble thing, especially in times of great uncertainty and distress. To sing, to pray, to seek wisdom with one another - these do not seem capable, quite, of restoring equilibrium to the world, to say nothing of restoring beauty. To be the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, in this little corner of a little town in a little state can seem a tiny thing given the tectonic shifts taking place beneath our feet right now. And yet the poet still writes, and we still gather. Perhaps we too may be of some use.

We are, of course, still in the bulrushes with Miriam, watching what the current is doing around us. Last week, drawing upon the South Africa Kairos Document, I spoke about the three forms of theology available to us - State theology, Church theology, and Prophetic theology. But on this Sunday dedicated to the reception of new members, I thought it might be helpful to speak more broadly about the institution of the church itself, and why progressive churches like this one might still matter. Indeed, I suspect that they might come to matter even more in the days to come.

No one has a kind word to say about the institutional church right now, and I get it. We've talked about that a lot this fall. Between the betrayal of public trust, the moral and ethical paralysis of many congregations, and the way Christianity itself seems to attract some of the more reactionary elements in our culture, it's hard to mount a defense of the institutional church. Given some of the developments of the past two and half weeks, however, it may be that it's time to do just that. To use the Apostle Paul's metaphor, there are fires that can and do arise in the course of human history. Well constructed churches - gatherings of ordinary people who share their lives together, who enact the teachings of Jesus, who break bread with one another - these can be a protective barrier against such fires, while also reducing the heat. Now is the time to build and strengthen this thing called the church.

Before going any further, I should tell you a little of how my own thinking about institutional religion, and institutions more broadly, has evolved over the years. I've told you about how the evangelical world that I was immersed in during college came to feel narrow and confining, and of how I had to go through a sort of de-conversion process to emerge from that world. I never managed to give up on faith, though, and one of the people that helped me put the pieces back together was a renegade minister named Will D. Campbell. Campbell was associated with Koinonia Farm down in Georgia, an interracial experiment in communal living during the height of Jim Crow, a community that our church has partnered with over the years. And he was a leader within the civil rights movement, the lone white person on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel when MLK was assassinated. But he was also a sassy and foul mouthed and very funny preacher and raconteur who refused to be a part of the institutional church. In fact, he scorned the institutions. He wouldn't even call them churches. He called them "steeples." He thought that the real church was something that happened spontaneously, wherever two or three people were gathered who showed mutual love and concern for one another.

Once, he said in an interview that he could make a really good case that the bar he and his wife went to every Saturday night was church. People know one another there. They tell stories about what's happening in their lives. He told the interviewer, "I get up on the stage there every week and say who's sick and who's in jail that needs a visit. And I know that if I had a crisis in the middle of the night I could call any of the people in that bar and they'd show up at my house before I could even get my britches on. Now," Campbell said, "I could make a really good case that that's the church." Then he turned the screw. "But I ain't gonna do that. 'Cause as soon as I did, they'd draft up a set of bylaws and have a bulletin waiting for me at the door and they'd tell me I'm only allowed to drink Pabst Blue Ribbon beer."

I still love Will D. Campbell, and I still love that vision of church. I love the freedom of it, the way it twists free of the desire to control and manage the life of the spirit. But somewhere along the way it became clear to me that, for all of its flaws, for all of its bureaucracy and blind spots, we might actually need an institution if there was going to be something like a civil rights movement, and if there were going to be people like Will Campbell in the world. It was the institution that preserved the stories of Jesus. It was the institution that cultivated a social imagination capable of standing against the powers and principalities of the world. It was the institution that leavened the society around it. It was the institution that provided a kind of container, which allowed people to bring the stirrings of their inner lives into a community. Take all that away, and little by little, even the bar that Campbell talked about becomes just another gathering of desperate and lonely souls. For all its many imperfections, the institution functions as a wellspring from which profound sources of life can flow.

Meanwhile, as many churches and other religious institutions have emptied out, many of us are left wondering if we haven't lost something essential to our humanity. When the only stories we know come to us from Netflix, what properties of the soul get remaindered?

Now, here's where things get interesting. Will Campbell did most of his writing in the 70's and 80's. That's precisely the moment when many people started becoming spiritual but not religious. And it's precisely the moment that other anti-institutional reforms were emerging in economics and politics. These were captured under the name neoliberalism. Margaret Thatcher, one of the most zealous neoliberal advocates, summed up its ethos well when she said "There is no society. There are only individuals." That was a way of saying that institutions, particularly those related to government, should be eliminated or shrunk, freeing (or abandoning)

individuals to the whims of the marketplace. Since the late seventies and early eighties, politicians on both the left and the right have set about trying to make that statement a reality. Organizations, laws, regulations, and institutions have all been rolled back in order to make room for private enterprise. In the 1990's, broadcast media was deregulated, giving rise to right wing shock radio, Fox News, and now a thousand and one news podcasts. The financial sector was deregulated, giving us things like sub-prime loans and the financial crash of 2008. Labor protections have been rolled back, giving rise to the gig economy. Welfare has been eliminated, while the number of private prisons has soared. The Civil Rights Act has been severely curtailed. Roe v. Wade has fallen. The powers of the Environmental Protection Agency have been stymied. Public schooling has been subjected to relentless attacks in the name of family choice, while social security and even the post office have long been in the cross-hairs of the anti-institutionalists. In effect, we've endured a forty five year erosion of the civil sphere, leaving private individuals to face the uncertainties of the marketplace entirely on their own.

But I want you to see this too: at the precise moment this was happening, just when financial markets and the airwaves were being deregulated, so too the spiritual marketplace was being deregulated. The 1970's and 1980's saw the rise of the evangelical megachurches and the Moral Majority, which is exactly when Mainline churches began a slow and steady decline. No longer did you need a seminary degree to practice ministry. And no longer did you need the guardrails of theology to help you avoid some of the worst excesses of religion. In this deregulated space, any charismatic individual with a little financial backing could start a ministry. No denominational oversight was or is necessary.

But now, even those deregulated spiritual institutions, the megachurches, are struggling. That's because every person can become their own spiritual entrepreneur, building their own spiritual life as if it were a small business. Institutions are extraneous to that work. Much as I love Will Campbell, I think his critique winds up fitting into this wider pattern, replicating it from a more sophisticated angle. It ends up in the same place, leaving individuals more or less on their own, or huddled together in the local bar.

Which brings us right up to the present day. What we're seeing in the early rounds of cabinet appointments in the new Presidential administration is an acceleration and an intensification of this process. Those nominations have been designed to produce maximal shock, but there is a strategy. According to Timothy Snyder, a historian down the road at Yale, the strategy is the wholesale dismantling of the federal government, turning it over to the private sector. That might sound good to some, but it turns out those institutions are holding a lot of things together - things like the rule of law and public health, things like public education and transportation. Timothy Snyder is no wild eyed prophet - he is as sober as they come. He's calling this a decapitation strike.

If I were to guess, the effect will be something like what happened in Iraq in 2003: an economic and institutional shock doctrine where every last part of the economy was either privatized, or eliminated. It was chaotic, and ordinary people suffered immensely. But it made some individuals and some corporations very wealthy, and very powerful. I'm still Miriam in the bulrushes here. And I'm doing my best to discern the currents. But I think this is where the current is taking us.

Which brings us back to the church. Why might the institutional church still matter in such a time? And how might we strengthen ourselves for what is coming?

First, and most broadly, I think this is a time to reexamine our reluctance about institutions, including the institutional church. That reluctance and skepticism has often served

us well. But forty five years of anti-institutional erosion has left far too many people exposed and alone. With that in mind, I think it's time to move in a different direction, and to commit to strengthening institutions, including and especially religious institutions - like this one.

Second, institutions can provide guardrails against the worst excesses of individualism. Laws, for example, are unwieldy and sometimes burdensome, but when and if they function well, they prevent abuses like the seizure of public goods for private benefit. So too institutional churches, with their rich deposits of theology and liturgy, can help to protect against spiritual manipulation. And so we can strengthen ourselves through study - of the Bible, but also of theology and of the sciences and of the culture that we participate in.

Third, as other social services and agencies are either eliminated or stripped of funding, there will be ever greater needs in the community around us. Having strong local institutions, including churches, can help to address those needs, whether it's for food, shelter, medical services or education. It may be that we need to run medical and dental clinics concurrently with our Food Pantry, for example. We can strengthen ourselves through service.

Fourth, some public institutions have become, and are likely to become again, the targets of organized intimidation campaigns meant to discredit and weaken them - libraries, school boards, and other local boards. So too, elected officials trying to uphold basic norms are likely to experience intimidation. We'll need to support them. Now is the time to strengthen the bonds with our institutional neighbors, covenanting to uphold and strengthen one another, much as we did when the far right attacked the library here in Old Lyme two summers ago. A strong church, in other words, can help to strengthen other institutions. We can strengthen ourselves through solidarity and mutual aid.

Fifth, institutional churches can help to guide the young. If it is true that young men have become especially susceptible to authoritarian impulses because of who and what they're listening to, and if it's true that they've become adrift, churches like this one can still provide a different kind of moral formation for the young, while they're still with us. We can help them to understand that there is a world out there beyond the pursuit of wealth and influence, involving meaningful service to humanity. Perhaps it is time, here at FCCOL, to create a program that pairs some of our more senior members with younger families, where the young and the old could learn from one another. We can strengthen ourselves through intergenerational relationships.

Sixth, institutional churches can be the containers that allow people like you and me to find one another in our loneliness, and in our isolation. Some of our best thinkers have suggested that it's loneliness that makes authoritarian movements attractive to many people. By connecting with one another, by visiting one another, by hearing one another's stories, we reduce that tendency. We learn how to love one another, even and especially across our differences. We can strengthen ourselves by committing to those who have chosen to walk with us on our life journeys.

Seventh and finally, institutional churches remain the repositories of the stories of Jesus, but also of the Apostles, the Prophets and the Poets. It's a rich world of the imagination, and, when used well, it has yielded lives full of generosity, grace, forgiveness and compassion. That deposit of stories has yielded movements of the spirit that have transformed our world for the better. We can strengthen ourselves by continuing to nurture those stories among ourselves, while also putting them into practice.

I return at last to Louise Glück. It is true that there is not enough beauty in the world - and perhaps not enough compassion and care as well. And it is true that we alone are not

competent to restore it. But we may be of some help. By building upon the strong foundation laid before us, we can help to provide some of the stability that will be required for the days ahead. By continuing to build the church of Jesus Christ, we can provide the hope and the courage to stand with resolve. The storms - the fires if you will - may come. My hope is that they shall reveal a strong foundation and the careful craftsmanship of the workers - all of us - ready to serve a world in need. May we be of use. Amen.