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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: I Samuel 17 (Selections); Luke 24: 32
March 3, 2024 Sermon

Smooth Stones, Gathered from the Road:
A Report on the Pilgrimage for Peace

A book that I return to frequently, and that I have often referenced from the pulpit, is Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell*. It names a curious but pervasive phenomenon, whereby human beings, confronted by disasters of one sort or another, manage to build extraordinary communities of resilience and joy that somehow transcend the disaster. Solnit studies the communities that sprang up after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, the Halifax explosion of 1917, and more contemporary events like 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Where public narratives often suggest chaos or social breakdown, Solnit finds that, more often than not, the opposite was true: people found one another, cared for one another, and connected with one another in ways they often weren't able to achieve in their ordinary lives. Weirdly, paradoxically, the disaster brought out the best in human beings rather than the worst. It's a pattern that people of faith might recognize from the New Testament, where the earliest Christian community, joyful and ecstatic, emerges from the shadow of a disaster, the crucifixion.

I have, from time to time, experienced those moments of paradise. I felt it during our Sanctuary endeavors, and I felt it during Covid. I have seen it in some of our mission partnerships, and I have seen it among some of you when you have lost people that you love. Strangely, the catastrophe opens up a space within us in which a fuller part of our humanity can be accessed, in which we are somehow capable of reaching past the ephemeral and grasping that which is abiding. I don't know how it works. But I know it to be true.

I share all of that by way of prologue, because that's how it felt for those of us who were able to participate in the Pilgrimage for Peace last week and the week before. The journey began in Philadelphia on Ash Wednesday, the day that Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, moving inexorably toward the cross. It concluded 7 days later in Washington, D.C., just outside the grounds of the White House.

In keeping with the theme of Lent, the Pilgrimage was an occasion prompted by mourning and critical self-examination. It was an occasion prompted by grief and by outrage at the slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza. To date, some 30,000 people have been killed, nearly 13,000 of whom were children. The enormity of the killing is staggering, as is the destruction of civic infrastructure, and the starvation that has resulted from all the devastation. Much of it has been, tacitly or explicitly, sanctioned by the United States. And most of the bombs that have been dropped - now numbering more than the number dropped by the Allies in World War II - have been manufactured in the United States, by the usual suspects: General Dynamics, Boeing, Raytheon, and a handful of others. No one on the Pilgrimage was dismissive of the violence of Hamas. Quite the contrary. Nor did anyone ignore the very real threat of anti-semitism that continues to afflict the world. It was all of a piece with the grief, mourning and outrage that each of the pilgrims carried within them.

Even so, miraculously, it was a sense of hope and joy that prevailed throughout the entire journey. How could such a thing be possible? Each of us who went came back feeling more hopeful and energized than when we had left. Each of us who went came back feeling spiritually nourished. Each of us came back feeling more rather than less connected to others, more rather than less connected to our traditions, more rather than less committed to effecting some kind of transformation in the world. Each of us came back having experienced a little of what it means

to create a paradise built in hell. This morning, Susan and I would like to share a few insights about how that came to be, and what lessons it might offer us here at FCCOL.

Perhaps the very first thing to share about the Pilgrimage was that it was broadly ecumenical in focus. That was one reason that it felt so hopeful. It emerged among a handful of African Methodist Episcopal congregations, and was supported by a broad array of rabbis and other Jewish voices of conscience. It was supported by Muslim communities, some of whom offered hospitality to those on the Pilgrimage. It was supported by Hindus, some of whom see parallels between the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, the rise of Jewish nationalism in Israel, and the rise of Christian nationalism here in the US. It was supported by Buddhists - you'll shortly hear the story from Susan of one Buddhist man who was a part of the pilgrimage. It was supported by churches like ours, and it was also supported by people who weren't especially religious at all, at least not in any conventional sense.

The Pilgrimage represented the kind of community, and the kind of embracing humanity, that we most wish to see in the world. And it represented the kind of broad and inclusive theology that we have long sought to practice in our congregation. Yes, we are rooted in the Christian faith. But in this day and age, it is no longer sufficient simply to read our Bibles and to study theology and to pray to our God without recognizing - better yet, without celebrating - our kinship with other traditions and practices. To put a finer point on it still, it is also no longer sufficient, if it ever was, to recognize that kinship without also affirming the struggle for human rights and human dignity, wherever those struggles might arise. At its essence, I believe, the practice of religion is about the pursuit of human rights. Full stop. And so the Pilgrimage afforded us all the chance to glimpse, to feel, and to relish, that shared sense of humanity across our traditions.

But it also gave us a feeling of confidence about our traditions. Let me say a word about that. One of the greatest sources of sorrow for many of us on the Pilgrimage - whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, etc. - had to do with the ways our religious traditions had been used to sow violence and oppression. But that's not all. Christianity has, quite rightly, been subjected to all manner of criticism - for its treatment of women, for its legacy within the trans-Atlantic slave trade, for legitimating colonialism, for cover ups of sexual abuse, and on and on the stories go. It can be hard to recall sometimes what is salutary and good about the Christian faith, or sometimes any faith at all.

The Pilgrimage allowed us to get in touch with the most freeing and liberatory parts of our traditions, including Christianity. Here, I wish to single out the leadership of Rev. Stephen Green, who comes out of an African Methodist Episcopal congregation in Harlem. It was Rev. Green who dreamed up the Pilgrimage, and it was he who exhorted us at various points along the way. Days would begin and end with singing - often with older gospel songs that emerged from the Black church, a reminder of the durability of those songs, and of that spirituality, forged in the fires of previous struggles.

But so too, the stories of Scripture illumined our path. When we arrived at the White House, Rev. Green reminded us of the story of David and Goliath, where Goliath became not a single warrior but an entire military industrial complex. Goliath in this retelling was armed not with a sword or a spear, but with missiles and tanks, with guns and with drones, with surveillance tools and with bunker busting bombs. But then, we were reminded of how David renounced the weapons of his own day, choosing instead to show up before Goliath as someone profoundly vulnerable, without armor and without weapons, save for a few stones gathered from a river. In Rev. Green's recasting of the story, the five smooth stones were virtues, marked with the words

peace, non-violence, love, justice, and human rights. Like David, those on the Pilgrimage stood before a modern day Goliath, a state armed to the teeth. And we stood there armed with little more than those five smooth stones - peace, non-violence, love, justice, human rights. Following the words of Scripture, our task was to trust that five smooth stones could indeed take down a giant. Our task was to trust that even one of those stones could lodge itself in the forehead of the giant. Did you notice that feature of the story? One of the stones, the text tells us, lodged in the forehead of Goliath. It's a detail suggesting that the Hebrew text had already gone a long way toward allegory. Stones, to my knowledge, don't tend to become lodged in a forehead, even in battle. That seems far more true of words. Words can become lodged in a forehead, in the act of persuasion. Ideas can become lodged in a forehead, in the act of argumentation. A moral and a spiritual vision can become lodged in a forehead, through love and prayer. In fact, such a groundswell is occurring right now, as people from all manner of backgrounds and sensibilities demand a ceasefire in Gaza. That demand, that prayer, is becoming lodged in a good many foreheads right now. Five smooth stones may be what is required to stop the Goliaths of the world.

I recount all of that because Rev. Green and his cohorts helped to remind us all of the strength and vitality of the Christian and Judaic traditions, as practiced by its most skilled and courageous adherents. The Pilgrimage was a rejoinder to all who would dismiss Christian faith, or any faith tradition, as too damaged or flawed to retain credibility. And it was a reminder to us, here at FCCOL, that the tradition we practice remains powerfully life affirming, capable of sustaining not only a movement of peace and justice, but capable of sustaining our very lives as we move from womb to tomb. It was a reminder of the powerful resources that we do have within our sacred stories.

I'd like now to invite Susan Switzer to share a little of her experience on the Pilgrimage, and the learnings that she took away.

Susan Switzer:

Now that same day, two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They talked to each other about all things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together . . . Jesus himself drew near . . . and HE went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. Luke 24: 13-16

I didn't recognize HIM either.

I was with Jody and Bill Billuzi, Jody's nephew Dan, and Laura Fitzpatrick. We were driving on Route 40 in Delaware. Bill was in the front seat with Dan. Dan was driving. Laura, Jody, and I were in the back. We all kept looking out our windows.

Then we saw them — a small band of walkers — on the other side of the highway. “Hey, they're over there.” we all seemed to yell out, in unison. It looked like there were about 15 people walking.

There was a car in front of them . . . driving real slow . . . it had its flashers on. There was a white van following the group . . . it had its flashers on too.

There were two people carrying a black and white sign with the words Pilgrimage for Peace written on it.

There was a woman carrying a Palestinian flag. It had the words Cease Fire painted in red across it.

Dan honked the car horn to show our solidarity — to say we were coming!

We made a fast u-turn (legal) onto the other side of Route 40, pulled up ahead of the pace car, and jumped out fast.

Quickly, we caught up and got into step. With the four of us showing up — we had just increased the Pilgrim count by 25 percent!

It was cold, but the group was walking at a good pace.

I warmed up quickly. In fact, I began to sweat and soon began peeling off some of the layers of clothes I had on.

And about 2 miles in I realized that my work boots, as comfy as they seemed, were simply not made for walking.

As we hit our strides . . . we started talking to the other walkers . . . about all things that had happened . . . on the walk thus far.

Where are you from? Why have you come? What have we missed?

I met Grace and learned that she had come all the way from Encino, CA. She had paid her own way and left her two children at home with her husband. Grace came because she and her friends were outraged by the genocide that was happening in Gaza.

I met Josh, a fun loving jewish songwriter and storyteller from RI.

He brought stories to share and songs to sing that he had composed and taught us along the way.

He came because, he said, “I have to be here.”

There were four Jewish women from the Hudson River Valley who drove down that morning. They were there because they were so distraught and heart-broken that Palestinians were being killed “in their name.” They shared that they had to do something! They simply could not, not come.

I met Norm. He was from Maryland, He had physical challenges but was determined to keep up with everyone. He did. And he was an inspiration.

There was a quiet, self-contained did-not-say-much guy from Berkley who was always present and seemed to keep us moving just by his presence.

And of course, there were our organizers, Revs. Stephen (Green) and Leslie (Rev. Dr. Copeland-Tune) and communications guru, Arianna (Morrell) from the National Council of Churches, who tag teamed walking with us, as they also took care of our daily needs and challenges.

Then, there was Tim. He was dressed in an orange tunic. He always walked up front. He carried a drum — hitting and chanting — as we walked. Every time he chanted, we responded in kind.

Namu Myoho Renge Kyo Namu Myoho Renge Kyo

OK maybe not just like that . . . but that’s what I was chanting.

Laura and Steve, how about you? Is that what you were chanting too?

I learned from Tim that he is part of a Buddhist Order called Nipponzan Myohoji.

It’s a small Buddhist order founded in 1917 by Nichi-datsu Fujii. Fujii walked and prayed for peace beating a prayer through many parts of the world for the bulk of his 100 year life. He instructed his disciples to do the same (newenglandpeacepagoda.org).

Fujii also urged the order to build Peace Pagodas — as places for individual and collective reflection on peace.²

Only 2 hours from here, in Leverett, MA sits The New England Peace Pagoda.

Built in 1985, it’s the first of the order’s pagoda’s in the U.S. Three more are being built in the U.S. right now. ³

I didn’t know these things of Tim’s Buddhist order until I got home, but as we walked Tim shared that the most important tenant of his religious practice was walking.

Simply walking. Walking as prayer. Not sitting and praying. Not meditating on a cushion, but walking.

Walking with his feet praying. That kinda blew my mind.

He was upending my understanding of Buddhism. Granted I'm no Buddhist scholar. But for years, I've read some of the teachings of Tich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist Monk.

I've followed the writings and work of the Dalai Lama, seen him in person at Radio City Music Hall (along with 3,000 other people),

And since Covid, I've been trying to become a regular morning meditator on zoom with The Cambridge Insight Meditation Center. So, I was really intrigued. Exactly, what are you saying Tim?

"Susan, our form of Buddhism, is an "out-in-this world" versus "a going within" kind of Buddhism.

Yes, of course, one can go in to pray, but our practice is about walking in the world. It's about walking in prayer with others.

Each step . . . we're meant to feel the energy of the earth. . . Each step . . . we're to feel the energy of all creation . . . Each step . . . we're to share ourselves with others . . .

And doing that, changes us and changes our surroundings.

THAT is transformation!"

I'm not sure I completely got it at that moment. How could our little rag-tag band of walkers on this stretch of route 40 really be making a difference?

But Tim said more. Twenty-five years earlier, he and his wife sold everything and started walking. He joined others to retrace the middle passage slave journey first along the eastern seaboard of the U.S. and then across and into western Africa.

That Pilgrimage took him and others a year. To learn more about it go to PBS and find the program, This Far by Faith.

But what was important about his year-long walking journey, in the context of our conversation, is that Tim said he was changed by the people he met, every day walking in Africa.

And the people they met were changed too.

Because folks in the same little community who had never met before met for the first time.

People who never talked together before, talked for the first time.

People who had never joined forces together before, joined forces to welcome in the pilgrims.

The community was never the same after the pilgrims came.

I was changed by walking two days of the Pilgrimage for Peace. And I believe we changed others too.

The folks of the Islamic Center of Delaware were so grateful for our coming to evening prayers, for having dinner with them. Our literal physical presence —as Pilgrims demanding Cease Fire Now! — was a boost for the community.

Our showing up at New Elizabeth AME Church in Newark, Delaware seemed to make a difference too. Pastor Cobb witnessed to us how God had used her to rebuild the Church. She shared her story, but in our listening, we affirmed her ministry.

This is what Tim was talking about.

How one step can change us, change another, can reverberate, or as Steve says, one small smooth stone can change the world!

No matter if we are physically able to walk or not. We can take a step. Have a conversation. Notice a chance encounter. Make a phone call to your neighbor or a call to get-out-the vote.

As I was preparing my reflection for this morning . . . I looked up Tim's name on my phone, to get it right, and I accidentally hit the call button.

Dang. . . I didn't mean to do that.

I heard Tim's voice, Hello? . . . Hello?

A bit of panic set in. Should I answer? I don't really need to talk to him. But, hey, this is a God moment I thought, so I said,

"Hey Tim, it's me, Susan from the walk. We talked about how walking transforms" "Hi Susan! Yes, I remember you, how are you? . . .

Those on the road to Emmanus eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Luke 24: 31-32 My heart was burning as we talked on the road.

My eyes were opened.

And then I recognized HIM in our midst. He was wearing an orange robe. She was carrying a Cease Fire sign. He was driving a van. They were feeding us.

And then they vanished out of sight.

Take a step! Go tell what happened on the road! Amen!

Steve:

Let me wrap things up with a call. But first, so that you can understand the call, let me tell one final story. On one of the mornings, I was privileged to walk for an hour or so with Rabbi Allisa Wise, whose name I knew through our Tree of Life work. Allisa was one of the leaders of the organization Jewish Voice for Peace during the last decade, and she has gone on to form a new group, called Rabbis for a Ceasefire. You should know that when I introduced myself, she knew and respected the work that we do here at Old Lyme. You should also know that David Good's work on this issue for two decades has earned this congregation a place of honor among many of the rabbis working on behalf of Palestine. We can and should be proud of all that David has done to build such relationships, and to make of this - the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme - a place that people on the front lines of human rights work are proud to be associated with.

We talked for a good long while, and among the many things she shared was a profound challenge. Jewish Zionists are indeed a political force in the United States, she said, and part of her work is to pry those two realities apart, so that Judaism isn't synonymous with Zionism. She has her work cut out for her. But she reminded me that Jews represent a small number of people in the United States - depending on how you count, between 5 and 9 million people. The greater problem, she said, is Christian Zionism. You guys are the real political force, she told me. She further shared that, in a recent meeting with the UN General Secretary, Antonio Guterres, he shared that the greater resistance to a ceasefire that he received, by far, came from Christian Zionists in the United States, especially those who believe that Israel is a part of God's plan for the end times. But there's also a softer Christian Zionism, she shared, which is found in Mainline churches like ours, among those who reflexively identify with Israel and with Israeli politics because of shared Scriptures, the commonality of our traditions, and remorse about the legacies of antisemitism and the Holocaust. Remorse about that legacy is salutary and good. But that shouldn't render us incapable of critical thought. Sometimes, after all, the abused become the abusers. And so, Allisa Wise told me, Christians in evangelical and Mainline churches share responsibility for creating a culture of complicity around Israel's treatment of Palestinians. It is Christians, she said, that have worked most consistently to block a ceasefire.

I felt humbled and not a little chastened to hear that. Not because our community hasn't done its part to pursue another way, but because there's yet more that we might do. To that end, our Board of Deacons met on Tuesday night, and they suggested that we have short postcards prepared for this morning. They're addressed to our two Senators from Connecticut, and to the

President. They read, “As a member of the community of the First Congregational Church in Old Lyme, CT, I am horrified, not only by the Oct. 7 attacks on Israelis, but also by the continuing slaughter of innocent Gazans. I urge you to demand an immediate and permanent ceasefire and massive humanitarian aid for Gaza. Sincerely, with your name and address.”

Would you sign one of those after the service today? It would be a way of bringing the Pilgrimage for Peace back home to FCCOL. It would be a way of carrying forth all that we learned and experienced as a result of the Pilgrimage. Each name signed is a smooth stone of peace and of non-violence meant to lodge in the mind of our elected leaders. Each card sent is a smooth stone of love sent on behalf of Palestinians, and Israelis too, who desire the ways of a just peace. And each of you - each of you are yourselves a smooth stone - a stone of love, a stone of peace, a stone of non-violence, a stone of decency, a stone of human rights - that can lodge in the imagination of another. Each of your lives helps to build a paradise even in the midst of hell - in Palestine, in Israel, and here too, at FCCOL.