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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Matthew 2: 1-12; I John 4: 1, 16-21
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Not Every Spirit: On the Power of Discernment

It is, of course, Epiphany Sunday, when Christians around the world mark the arrival of the three kings in Bethlehem to worship the newborn child, Jesus. The magi, we are told, come in search of wisdom. Tomorrow, throughout Latin America and parts of Europe, people will be celebrating Three Kings Day with processions, feasts, and parties, recreating that journey, and that eternal search for wisdom, which, it should be recalled, led not to books of philosophy, not to the study of the cosmos, and not even to the study of sacred Scriptures, but rather to the birthplace of a tiny child.

In addition to being Epiphany Sunday, today is also the 12th day of Christmas, when, as the song has it, twelve drummers are drumming. We won't be recreating any portion of that song this morning, but speaking for myself, some part of me is still lingering in the holidays. And some part of me, and perhaps you too, is reluctant to face into what will surely be a challenging year. And so I thought that it might be helpful to begin the year as gently as I can, reminding us of a few things that may prove useful in the coming weeks, in our common search for wisdom.

The place I'd like to begin is with a poem from the 13th century poet, Rumi. You'll find it printed on the back of your bulletins. Rumi was an Islamic mystic who loved many things, including, as the poem reveals, Jesus. He offers a religious model that's more urgent now than ever, for we who love Jesus, we who care about the Christian tradition, we may also, in reverse manner, find ourselves loving Islam, or Judaism, or perhaps something farther afield, like the African traditions we've explored off and on here for the past several years. Or, we lovers of Jesus might find ourselves loving a medieval Islamic mystic, like Rumi. Let our loves be many.

In that spirit, here is the poem, *The Many Wines*:

God has given us a dark wine so potent that,
drinking it, we leave the two worlds.

God has put into the form of hashish a power
to deliver the taster from self-consciousness.

God has made sleep so that
it erases every thought.

There are thousands of wines
that can take over our minds.
Don't think all ecstasies
are the same!

Jesus was lost in his love for God.
His donkey was drunk with barley.

Drink from the presence of saints,
not from those other jars.

Every object, every being,
is a jar full of delight.
Be a connoisseur,
and taste with caution.

Any wine will get you high.
Judge like a king, and choose the purest,
the ones unadulterated with fear,
or some urgency about "what's needed."

Drink the wine that moves you
as a camel moves when it's been untied,
and is just ambling about.

God has given us many wines, Rumi says, and what he means, of course, is that there are all kinds of things that we as human beings give ourselves to, and all kinds of things that we as human beings can lose ourselves to. God only knows that there are substances that can intoxicate, yes, but so can other things: money can intoxicate, and sex can intoxicate; so too religion, or a charismatic leader, or learning, or beauty, or exercise - these can intoxicate. Or further, some political or moral fervor can sweep us up and intoxicate us. These too can produce a kind of high. There's a lovely, and freeing way in which Rumi accepts without judgment that human tendency toward ecstasy in one form or another. If you're alive, he implies, at certain times you're going to seek out, and you're going to need, ecstatic experience. It's all from God, Rumi says. And so quit kicking yourself when you do seek out this or that form of ecstasy.

Even so, it's not all of the same quality. It's not all worthy of your palate, worthy of your praise, worthy of your spirit. You can be a donkey, Rumi reminds us, and you can get drunk on something as common, as unrefined, as barley. Be a connoisseur, and taste with caution, he advises.

In all of this, Rumi echoes the letter of I John. There, the writer urges his readers to test the spirits, for not every spirit is of God, he says. The word used for "spirit" is *pneuma*, which means breath, or respiration. It's literally that which animates you, that which gives you life, that unseen but crucial substance that you depend upon in order to be. John's letter is a little more polemical than Rumi's poem, and so it's a little more pointed in its refusal of certain spirits. Still, John's advice is sound. Not every spirit, not every thing which seems to fill us with life is of God. Some things, which might seem benevolent, can actually be quite destructive. And it's not always easy to know the difference. Which is why the spirits must be tested.

The rule against which such a test takes place, according to the writer of John's epistle, is love. God is love, the writer affirms, which also implies the reverse - love is God, or at least, love is where God is discovered. I know that can sound pious and a little cheesy, but I think it simply means that wherever care, wherever responsibility before others, wherever mutual affection takes place - that's where God is. It means that wherever mutual joy or satisfaction,

wherever concern for the well being of another, wherever sacrifice for the sake of another takes place - that's where God is. It means that wherever self-interest is overcome and generosity is displayed, wherever nihilism is transcended and meaningful engagement is practiced, wherever a historic or present wrong is addressed in the pursuit of justice - that's where God is. It means that whenever our lives begin to look like that of Jesus, no matter what we may believe or disbelieve about him - that's where God is.

Testing the spirits is what the Christian tradition has called "discernment" over the years, and it's a lesson worth recalling at the start of this new year. I can't say with certainty what this new year will bring, but if the past decade is any warning, I think we'll start to see a rise in behaviors and policies that run counter to the spirit of Jesus. We have already, in numerous forms, witnessed people yielding to a form of intoxication, to a bitter wine, that is unbecoming of human dignity. You don't need me to list the ways. Here at the beginning of the new year, I merely wish to remind us to be pursuers of wisdom, like the wise men of old. I wish to remind us to use the power of discernment, as the writer of I John urged upon his readers. I wish to remind us to be connoisseurs, to taste with caution, and to drink from the presence of saints, not of con men, not of social media influencers, and certainly not of tech oligarchs.

If that's true of individual lives, I hope the same holds true for churches. Some years ago, a theologian at Union Theological Seminary in New York named Christopher Morse published a book entitled *Not Every Spirit*, a book that informs much of what I'm offering this morning. Morse traces the history of Christian thought through its struggle against what later came to be called heresies. He was interested in the moments when the church was forced to discern the spirits, in order to say, we need to go this way and not that, we need to move here and not there, we need to affirm this, but not that. I have no wish to revive the use of the term heresy, but much of what passes for Christianity these days, at least in this country, departs from the norms of Christian theology as it has grown across two millennia. Whether in distortions regarding Jesus and God, misunderstandings of what the Bible is and how it came to be, or in ignorance about historic teachings related to creation, or redemption, or the church's social witness, churches in this country have too often become captive to a narrow and parochial spirit of the age. I would hope that churches such as this one, but others like it as well, will continue the work of discerning the spirits together, that we might actually be the church of Jesus Christ in the years to come. I'm confident we will.

What I'd like to offer in closing is an example of one who discerned the spirits well throughout his many years, a person who seemed to drink from the presence of saints, to the point that he very nearly became one himself. I'm referring to Jimmy Carter, an American President that this congregation has been fortunate to interact with over the years. Many of us have traveled down to Koinonia Farm in Georgia, an experiment in interracial living built during the height of the Jim Crow era. It's the place from which, later, Habitat for Humanity was launched, and it's near to where Jimmy Carter lived, worked, and went to church.

I remember twelve years ago going to that church with several of you. We arrived early for the Sunday School class that Carter taught, and speaking for myself, I was amazed at how he worked through the verses of Scripture, line by line, relating them to his human rights work around the globe, and to the daily tasks of living that we all routinely faced. It was such a humble place to find an ex-President, and such a humble thing for an ex-President to be doing - teaching the Bible thoughtfully, humanely, and well. My estimation for him, already high, just soared.

Of course, that was something that Carter had done throughout his whole life, including during his time in the White House. It's something that grounded the decisions he made as a public figure, even when luck and fate conspired to undermine him. It's something that informed all of his work after the presidency on human rights campaigns in Palestine, in South Africa, in Haiti, and in many other places too. So much about the man seemed to flow from this ordinary practice of sitting in church, of reading the Bible well, and of living it out in his daily life. So much seemed to flow from his ability to discern the spirits, even when it was costly.

It's a major irony of U.S. history that it was primarily fellow Christians who wound up turning against Jimmy Carter in 1980, voting for a man who seldom went to church and didn't have much use for the Bible, other than paying it vague lip-service. It's also not an accident that Carter remained somewhat aloof from the club of ex-Presidents to which he belonged. As one story published this week reported, he could be critical, and he seemed to be following a different script than any of his successors.

Just how different that script was can be witnessed in a major event in the life of this community. In 2002, 34 members and friends of FCCOL flew to Durban, South Africa to participate in the Jimmy Carter Work Project for Habitat for Humanity. The goal was to build 100 houses in one week. Paul Verryn and some of his seminary students showed up. Manny Red Bear, from Green Grass, was there. Rachel Robinson, Jackie Robinson's widow, joined the group. And among them all, Jimmy Carter was there too. I'm told that throughout the week, he came to each of the 100 houses being built, and he worked on each of them for just a little bit, all while visiting, encouraging, and thanking those who had come from around the world to help. Frankly, it's hard to imagine any of Carter's successors dedicating themselves so fully to a project helping the poor in a different part of the world.

That effort wound up being called "The World House" by members of this congregation, a reminder of the need to tear down the barriers keeping the human family apart, a reminder of the need to construct relationships among people from very different backgrounds, a reminder of the need to build what the Bible calls a "New Creation," transcending all the divisions caused by nationalism and tribalism and all the other large and small forms of apartheid that human beings become trapped in. Jimmy Carter inspired that project, and many others like it. It's a bit of inspiration, a spirit really, that we sorely need to recall just now.

God has given us many wines. There are thousands that can take our minds and our spirits from us. Don't think they're all the same. Let us discern the spirits together, as the writer of I John admonishes us. Let us taste with care, becoming connoisseurs of visionaries and saints, emulators of those like Jimmy Carter, a builder of the great World House.

Any wine will get you high. But judge like a king or a queen, and choose the purest, the ones unadulterated with fear. In this new year, let us choose the ones that look and sound and taste like love. Amen.