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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: Matthew 7: 21-28; Matthew 25: 40
January 26, 2025

A Different Kind of Church

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine,
you did it to me.”
-Matthew 25: 40

It is, obviously, the Sunday of our Annual Meeting, a day which provides an opportunity to take stock of the year behind us, and to take note of where we are as a community. There's good news to report later on, and I hope you stick around to hear it. The long and short is that after a year of uncertainty about our finances, we finished the year with a substantial surplus - thanks to you!. We've spent much of this year thinking about the broad changes taking place in the life of religious institutions, and asking how we might respond, and perhaps even strengthen ourselves in such an environment. None of us have easy solutions to those changes, but I've been grateful for the ways this community has leaned into the challenges, and grateful for the way you have responded. I've seen it time and time again in my years at FCCOL. When there is a challenge, this community rises to meet it. We as ministers don't take that for granted, and I hope you don't either.

All around the country, churches are closing their doors or reducing their ministries. But we've come to learn through Convergence that we have more people attending FCCOL today than we did in 2018 and 2019, prior to Covid. I think that's because something good and hopeful is taking place here. Though many of us are apprehensive about what lies ahead in the life of our country and in the life of the world, I'll simply say that I take heart in being in your company, and in facing into this great unknown with all of you. To paraphrase an old song, we've got each other, and I think that's an awful lot.

We have one another - individually, yes. And we have this community of faith, this church. We have a firm foundation, as our hymn says, this source of confidence and stability in our lives. That raises the question of what it's all for, and how we shall put it to use. Is it for ourselves alone, that we might feel anchored in a storm tossed world? Or is it for the sake of that very same storm tossed world that we labor to build, and to maintain, this sanctuary space, this place of grace? I hope and trust that both are true - that even as we continue to find solace in this place, we'll understand that it's never about us alone. We bear certain responsibilities, laid upon us by the Gospel itself.

As we consider those responsibilities, I'd like to draw your attention to the flowers on our communion table this morning. They were given in honor of Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde, and the courageous and gracious words she spoke this past Tuesday at Washington's National Cathedral. I trust that all of you read about or saw the clip, where she simply asked the new President, respectfully, to be merciful toward those who are now feeling frightened - immigrants and their children and the LGBTQ population in particular. Mercy is a biblical quality prized by God, and as one claiming the mantle of God, she told the President, it would be a fitting gesture. I confess that I was as interested in the faces of those listening as I was in the words themselves - the words were dignified and gentle. But it was the blank expression on the faces of the listeners that struck me. It was the bland emptiness of those faces that lingers most in my mind, faces done up for the occasion, but devoid of any recognizable human emotion, other than a faint glimmer of entitlement: an eyebrow raised, lips slightly pursed, as if to say, “how dare a minister (a minister!) speak to us like that?”

It's probably true that half of all the pulpits in the United States are commenting upon that moment this morning, most of them favorably (if they're going to bother speaking about it, at all), but surely some less favorably. As one article put it on Wednesday, with those words two different kinds of Christianity burst into view, and confronted one another publicly. One sees itself as chosen by God to fulfill a divine mandate, which happens to coincide with a far-right social agenda, using faith itself as leverage for the rich and powerful to get more rich and more powerful. The other is represented by Bishop Budde, who used her power to speak for the vulnerable, aligning herself not with presidential authority but with the theology of Matthew 25: as you have done it to the least of these, Jesus says, so you have done it to me.

Two ways of understanding the meaning of Christian faith. Two ways of understanding the love of God. Two ways of understanding the responsibility, or lack of it, that comes with the Gospel. Both on very public display.

Of course, there are other possibilities beyond those - evangelical churches that have resisted the call of Trumpism, Mainline churches that say and do little to protect the vulnerable, and Catholic churches all across the theological and political spectrum. Add to it all the variety of perspectives found in black and Hispanic faith communities, and it can be dizzying to figure out what Christianity even is, still less who and what to trust. In our reading group of the South African Kairos Document this past week, we read a passage about how in South Africa in the 1980's, both oppressor and oppressed claimed loyalty to the Church. "There we sit in the Church," the writers say, "while outside Christian policemen and soldiers are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace." It's enough to make a person dizzy, or to wish to opt out of the whole enterprise.

I've been tempted in that direction from time to time throughout my own life, and so I can't blame anyone who might feel that way now. But I've also long held onto some words I read from a Japanese novelist, a Catholic named Shusaku Endo, who ultimately developed a large and encompassing view of Christian faith. Endo too tried to rid himself of faith at one time or another in his life, but he admitted, somewhat sheepishly at one point, that "Jesus has me in his grasp." And I don't know about you, but that's how I've felt throughout much of my life - that no matter how much I might try or pretend otherwise, and no matter how damaged or misused, there's something utterly compelling and arresting about Jesus, this flesh and blood poor itinerant peasant depicted in the Gospel stories. And I haven't been able to let him go. Or perhaps, he hasn't been willing to let me go. This is a Jesus who argues with and sharply criticizes the rich and the powerful. This is a Jesus who sometimes speaks in riddles. This is a Jesus who seems to like people who are down and out. This is a Jesus who seems to understand some of the deepest needs that people have. And this is a Jesus who models a wholly different way of being human, one based not on competition or dominance, but on affection, on forgiveness, on truth-telling, on healing - on love itself.

So look, in this contrast that emerged on Tuesday, there's no mystery about where our own allegiances lie as a church. But I want you to know that even though there are myriad forms of Christian faith, and myriad claims about which might be the true or the right one, you don't have to throw your hands up in the air, frustrated by the cacophony of voices. There are, I believe, some that are more legitimate than others. There are some that have moved pretty far from the norms of Christian faith, and there are some that, even as the accents fall in different places, have managed to maintain a clear view of that faith. It is possible to make an evaluation, and I believe much of it has to do with Jesus, and indeed, with the words of Matthew 25. I'll say more about that in a moment.

But if you don't have to throw your hands in the air in despair, if there are norms to guide us, that does not mean that there is a one size fits all model of what church or faith ought to look like. I appreciate the words of Neil Postman, a media theorist, who said that what lies behind every great truth is not a falsehood, but rather another great truth. That's certainly true of the many varieties and forms that Christian faith has taken over the centuries. We can rejoice in the wide lens available to us

when we celebrate the insights of our Catholic and Episcopalian friends, and our Lutheran and Baptist neighbors, but also our Orthodox, or Anabaptist, or yes, sometimes our evangelical brothers and sisters. There's no one right way of doing this, and thank God for that.

But our further instinct here at FCCOL is to extend Postman's insight toward other expressions of religious faith as well. It's no longer possible, and it's still less desirable, to be provincial in our understanding of faith and God. We also need the insights of our Muslim and our Jewish neighbors. We need the insights of the African diasporic traditions. And, now more than ever, we probably need the insights of the Asian traditions too, though here I confess my own limitations. Be that as it may, we celebrate and affirm what William James called "the varieties of religious faith" in the world, because they all afford wisdom that we might not receive were we to tune the "variety" out.

In the time that remains, I'd like to offer very briefly one of the ways that I have oriented myself amidst the cacophony of voices, one that I hope might be helpful to you. I find it useful for reading the Bible, especially when I encounter passages that seem to contradict the goodness of God. And I find it helpful in discerning among the various voices that all claim to be speaking in the name of God, or on behalf of God, even if many of those voices seem quite suspect.

It comes from Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant Reformation. In his early years, Luther was a very pious monk who struggled with the many voices that he heard speaking in the name of God. He struggled with the voice emanating from the church at that time, which seemed most concerned with its own preservation. And he struggled with the many voices of God that spoke through Scripture, some comforting, but some quite menacing. He worried that the most threatening voice, the one speaking the loudest, was actually the true voice of God, and it drove him into fits of depression and anxiety. When Luther confessed this to a trusted mentor, that mentor told him, "Take a fresh look at Jesus. He is a human being who doesn't terrorize, but comforts." And that advice began a kind of spiritual revolution in Luther, and it grounded everything he did, and everything he wrote from that point on.

In his commentary on Galatians, one of the founding documents of the Protestant Reformation, Luther wrote, "You must not climb up to God, but begin where God began - in his mother's womb he became human - and deny yourself the spirit of speculation. If you wish to be certain in your conscience...then you should know no God at all apart from this human Jesus, and depend upon this, his humanity. Hasten to the crib and to his mother's bosom and see him, an infant, a growing child, a dying man. Then you will be able to escape all fear and errors. This vision will keep you on the right way."

That's it. That's the measure. Keep your eyes trained on the humanity of Jesus. Which is to say, keep your eyes trained on the humanity of God, the way God locates Godself in the life of an infant, a growing child, a dying man. It was the teaching that Jesus himself gave when he was instructing his followers on how to find him after he was gone - look for me among the vulnerable, he said in Matthew 25. And it became the solid rock upon which Jesus admonished his listeners to build their own lives of faith - all else is sand, he implied.

It sounds simplistic, I know, and I suppose it can be used as such. But it has potentially radical implications for our theology, for our ethics, and for our politics, some of which are still waiting to be realized. In terms of theology, that measure was the interpretive key that Luther used to read the Bible. If what was happening in Scripture looked and sounded like this humble and merciful human named Jesus, then, Luther thought, it could be understood to be God. If not, then perhaps it was another voice speaking, of the sort we witnessed last Monday - a projection onto God of attributes that we actually don't find in Jesus - power, might, dominance, insisting upon his own way. So too, when looking at the behavior of the church, and churches, in the world, Luther used that insight as a measure to discern what was the voice of God in society, and what was not. To name the most famous example, when Luther saw the church engorging itself on the resources of poor and grieving people, selling them assurances that their loved ones would be spared torment in the afterlife, Luther threw a

fit, one that shook both the church and the world to the core. Such a practice could not have been of God, because it looked and sounded so little like Jesus - neither the infant, nor the growing child, nor the dying man.

We need to extend and broaden Luther's analysis for a new context, but I believe that his measure can still serve us well today. It represents a solid foundation upon which we can build our own faith, and upon which we can build our church. It represents a way for us to discern where the voice of God might actually be found.

But it expresses the responsibility that we bear to one another, and to our fellow human beings, which relates to our ethics and our politics. It's not a matter of speaking the name of Jesus loudly and often. I tend to distrust those who do. It's a matter of looking to the places where acts of mercy and tenderness, acts of generosity and grace, acts of solidarity and social witness are actually taking place. It matters little under whose name or auspices such acts happen. It's why, last night, when I visited the mosque in Farmington, and heard more of how the Muslim community was caring for, and risking themselves for those in Palestine and especially Gaza, I sensed the presence of God at work. It's why, when a group of us will visit Cuba six weeks from now, where we shall witness communities that have modeled endurance and dignity dating back to the time of enslavement, it will be something of God that we see. It's why, when I have spoken to many of our immigrant friends, and have heard of their pain and fear, but also of their determination to care for one another, it is something of God that I sense there. And it is why I, along with many of you, sensed something of God in Bishop Budde's words on Tuesday. No matter the name under which it travels, no matter the language in which it is spoken, no matter the form in which it is expressed, we can sense something of what was revealed to us in Jesus in such places - the beating heart of a loving, and broken, and gentle man. Wherever we find those qualities, we find God. Whenever we enact those qualities, we become bearers of God.

I'd like to close with the words of the Apostle Paul. In his famed letter to the Corinthians, he said this: Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

That sounds like Jesus. That sounds like a sure foundation upon which we can build.
All other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand.