

Rev. Dr. Steven Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: John 12: 1-3; John 13: 1-9
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The Joy of Losing Control:
A Different Kind of Church, Part II

I'll begin by revisiting some of the themes I laid out last week, when I spoke about the life and ministry of Jesus as the measure we might use to discern the presence of God in this confusing and hectic time. There are so many voices speaking in the name of God, speaking in the name of Jesus. And it can become tempting to tune it all out, even for those of us who identify as people of faith and conscience. But a careful reading of the Gospels reveals a far more complex and inviting figure than the images he is reduced to in popular discourse. Today, I'd like to focus on two related episodes from late in his ministry - stories that we just heard. And I'd like to draw out what they suggest about gender, what they suggest about control, and how they challenge the notions of masculinity and power now circulating around us.

But first a story. Over the last several months, I've been pressing a book into the hands of most everyone I know. In fact, over Christmas, I bought something like ten copies of this book. I gave some to colleagues and friends here at the church. I gave one to Rachael, and to Sabina and Elsa, as well as some other family members. The book is called *Liliana's Invincible Summer*, by Cristina Rivera Garza, and it is, quite simply, one of the most important books I've read in a long time. Rivera Garza is a MacArthur Genius recipient, and this particular book won the Pulitzer. It's that good. I read it slowly, in its original Spanish publication, and as a result, the people and the images became imprinted upon my heart. Reading the book became something like a holy experience for me.

It concerns a heavy topic, and I wasn't initially sure if I would be up for it. Rivera Garza's sister, Liliana, was murdered by her boyfriend some thirty five years ago, when she was a college student in Mexico City. Cristina and her parents grieved, of course, but the killer disappeared, and eventually the authorities lost interest in the case. And though the family carried an untreated wound within them for thirty years, they eventually had to find a way to sequester that loss within themselves, while rebuilding their lives. But cascading waves of femicide occurring throughout Mexico encouraged Cristina to reopen her sister's case after thirty years. The book is, in a way, a detective story, trying to reconstruct what happened to her sister all those years ago, and how it could have happened. It's a cry of grief, and of rage, and of protest, as she reopens old wounds, and is stunned by how the voices of young women are silenced in North America through control, through manipulation, and through physical violence. Above all, though, it is a feminist manifesto, filled with wisdom about how to be human in a world littered with sorrow, and about how to create a humane and compassionate future. I'm telling you, I loved this book, and I commend it to everyone here.

But why am I telling you about it from the pulpit? How does it pertain to the life of faith, to the life of Jesus, and to what we're going through right now as a country? Rivera Garza's book is a diagnosis of patriarchy and the dangers it poses for women, but also for men who don't conform to patriarchal norms. There's a continuum, of course, where femicide is the most extreme form. But it manifests in many other ways too, all of them insidious, all of them violent in their way, and all of them omnipresent in our culture just now. And many of them come

cloaked in a deformed version of Christian faith, one that you can read about in a book called *Jesus and John Wayne*. We do well to name this dynamic, while offering something better, in the name of Jesus the Christ.

Though it's probably not necessary, it's worth noting how thoroughly these twisted forms of patriarchy and masculinity have pervaded our public discourse. There is, of course, the election of a President convicted in a court of law for rape. There is the desire on the part of the new Secretary of Defense to return the military to a "warrior ethos," code for purging it of women, as well as gay, lesbian, and transgender members. There are the weirdly muscular torsos of the men who showed up at some of the notable political rallies this past summer and fall - Hulk Hogan tearing his shirt off, say, but then also the image of the President himself superimposed on Sylvester Stallone's oiled body on all those flags. There are all the tech bros who seem to be bulking up at the same time. There is the rise of ultimate fighting as a sport. There are the noisy oversized pickup trucks that have by now become weaponized. And then there's *Yellowstone*, one of the most popular television shows in all of America over the past several years. I was told by my uncle, who I love, that I ought to watch it, and so I tried. I did it when I was sick with Covid, and I think it made me sicker. The whole thing was an extended meditation on what constitutes a man. The answer was: whiskey, boots, cowboy hats, pickup trucks, stunted emotions, guns, outbursts of violence, and, well...roughhousing in the bunkhouse. You don't have to know anything about gender or queer theory to see what's going on here. It's pretty obvious.

It's not an accident that all of this developed over the last ten to fifteen years, when it became legal for gay and lesbian folks to marry, when transgender individuals became more public, when signs on bathrooms started changing in public places, and when we began to learn more about the utter complexity of gender. I believe that this reactionary assertion of masculinity that followed can be read as a form of deep anxiety and fear on the part of many, a fear that seems to me utterly misplaced. But it's one of the key features linking far right movements across the globe right now, and it is one of the central issues upon which our own election turned. The entire swath of instances I catalogued falls on the same continuum of machismo - sometimes closer, sometimes a little farther away - that robbed Liliana Rivera Garza of her life.

It's true, the Bible has been and is now being used to justify forms of masculine control and patriarchal authority. But a careful reading of the Bible reveals a striking counter-tradition, hidden in plain sight, where women and men alike resist those forms of control. One of the greatest examples is a passage that our Bible Study group focused on a few weeks ago. In Exodus chapter 1, when the Pharaoh (who is perhaps the preeminent version of toxic masculinity in the Bible) orders that Hebrew male children be put to death, two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, undercut that authority by deliberately lying to the Pharaoh. "The Hebrew women are so strong, and multiply so quickly that we just can't get to them all in time," the midwives tell Pharaoh. They can't carry out his orders. The midwives, along with Miriam in the following chapter, model a different way of being, one that can be traced throughout the text of the Hebrew Bible, and that can be found most prominently in Jesus himself.

In the Scripture lessons I chose for this morning, we see Jesus revealing a feminine aspect within himself, but also, by extension, within God. At the end of his life, when he is giving his disciples some final instructions on how to carry forth his ministry after he is gone, he gathers them for a final meal. But before they eat, he does something very unusual. He takes off his clothes, and then he wraps a towel around himself. And then this unclothed man kneels at the

feet of his friends, and he does something very intimate - he handles their feet, and he washes them, one by one. People of faith sometimes conduct footwashing ceremonies, and it's a strangely intimate act even now, after it has been ritualized. But imagine seeing this for the first time. Imagine experiencing it. Imagine what it would do to you, to have someone you admired, someone you respected, someone in whom you saw God, assume such a vulnerable posture. This is a masculinity unlike anything that currently passes for masculine behavior in our time. And yet, this is God incarnate, relinquishing control, relinquishing power, and kneeling in an act of humble and very intimate devotion - demonstrating his love for his friends.

But what I find most interesting about that episode is that Jesus is performing a gesture that had recently been offered to him. In the previous chapter, Mary, the sister of Martha, had gotten down on her knees and she had washed the feet of Jesus with a costly perfume, and its fragrance had filled the room. Other versions of that story in the Gospels add the detail that Mary (though she goes unnamed) weeps as she does this, her tears spilling onto Jesus's feet, which she then dries with her hair. It is, again, almost unbearably intimate, the kind of thing that makes us want to turn away out of modesty. And so when Jesus performs that same act for his disciples, he is quoting that earlier act. But we might better say that he is, in a way, becoming Mary (or the unnamed woman, as the case may be) right before the disciples' eyes, taking on her aspect, taking on her qualities. And he is revealing the same features that she displayed, features that have been coded as feminine in our culture - sorrow and devotion, intimacy and tears, service and a passionate expression of care and affection.

Contrary to our shrunken and distorted notions of masculinity, Jesus reveals a way of being human that exists beyond our gender binaries, in which we can embrace the full range of our inner world. We can incorporate what has been coded as female, as male, and what doesn't neatly fit either of those categories, because it's all part of what it is to be human. This is God incarnate we are talking about, which means that this is all a part of the Godhead. If you identify as male, there's no need to block out or hold in abeyance those traits coded as female - the part of you that feels or weeps, for example - in order to retain your masculinity. And it means that if you identify as female, you don't have to block out or repress that within you that is typically coded as male - strength or firm resolve or decisiveness, say - to retain your femininity. And it means that if you don't like those categories at all, if you find it all reductive in the first place and you want to create new ways of being human, new patterns of relationship that don't depend upon those tired old binary categories, well, you're free to do that too. Jesus already did. This is all a part of the new creation, the new humanity - which is to say, the fuller, wider, and deeper humanity - that he came to demonstrate. This is a humanity not of grim control, but one of lightness, of play, of feeling, of care, of self-giving, of joy, and sometimes of rebellion too. It's a humanity that encompasses Shiphrah and Puah, Miriam and Mary, Jesus...and you. And me. For your own sake and mine, but for the sake of the world, now is the time to claim such fullness of human life for ourselves.

I'll close by returning once again to *Liliana's Invincible Summer*. There's a brief and suggestive moment when Cristina Rivera Garza and her husband visit the architecture school in Mexico City where Liliana had been enrolled. There's a kind of free-flowing energy to the place, filled with open spaces and signs of creativity all around. People were moving about, and talking animatedly in small clusters, seeming to relish the exchange of ideas and passions. And Rivera Garza's husband remarks, almost in passing, that if you were a man obsessed with control, as Liliana's boyfriend was, you would hate a space like that. Someone like that, the husband remarks, someone obsessed with that kind of male authority, wouldn't have been able to

stand this. It's too free. It's too open. It's too vibrant. It's too joyful. It's the complete opposite, in other words, of everything on the continuum of masculine braggadocio and domination that we're witnessing in the world right now.

When I read that passage, I immediately thought, "that's precisely the kind of institution we need to be shaping." We need universities like that. We need elementary, middle, and high schools like that. We need arts organizations and community organizations like that. And we need churches like that. Places that are uninterested in that form of stunted male control. Places where people who are in thrall to those misguided and misshapen notions of personhood simply can't function. Unruly places that can't be bent or governed by those who are so transfixed. Places of learning and of sharing. Places of joyful laughter and belonging. Places where ideas are exchanged and conversations flow. Places where a wild variety of backgrounds and practices are celebrated. Places that resist narrow binaries. Places dedicated to the humble service of others. Places where the full spectrum of what it is to be a human being are affirmed and practiced, just as Jesus showed us.

Places like The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme.