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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Mark 1: 9-13; Luke 4: 14-19

March 9, 2025

Demonstration Plots for the Kingdom of God: Solentiname

Today marks the first Sunday of Lent, when we begin to follow Jesus on his pathway toward Jerusalem. For Lent this year, we've transformed the Meetinghouse into a Latin American cathedral, of a certain kind at least, complete with stations of the cross for our viewing and meditation. I'll share more about how these images came to be here in just a moment.

I'll begin with the words we used in our Call to Worship: Get up, go ahead, do something, move.

Last week when I stood before you, I made the case for a kind of spiritual diplomacy, a theological and ecclesial response to the turn toward isolation now being practiced in the US. I did so by encouraging us to continue our mission efforts here at FCCOL, and by putting out an appeal for medical supplies that travelers from this community might take to Cuba later this week. You all have responded with incredible generosity, as I knew you would, and I want you to know how grateful I am for your response. More than that, I want you to know how important these donations are to the Cuban people that we'll be visiting. It is a very real way of putting our faith into action, and of building the kind of bridges between peoples and cultures that we so desperately need in our world right now.

I'd like to consider the theme of spiritual diplomacy today from a different angle today, by telling you about the images that you now see placed all around the church. They come to us from an island archipelago called Solentiname, situated in the middle of Lake Nicaragua, a large body of water in the southwest of that country. It is a sequence of images forming the stations of the cross, rendered in a contemporary form. They reflect the struggle among peasants in that country during the 1960's and 1970's against the brutality and repression of a far right regime headed by Anastasio Somoza. But they also represent a way of doing theology, and a way of being the church, that is little understood or remembered in the United States these days.

Too often, we in North America tend to imagine the Christian church through the prism of our own practices. We often forget the variety of forms that Christianity has taken in other parts of the world throughout its history, and even throughout recent history. We do well to recall that variety, for they may be instructive for our own understanding and practice today. That is, in part, why we're reading the South African Kairos Document together. But it's also why, during this Lenten season, I wanted us to see and to reflect upon these images from Solentiname, Nicaragua, and to consider the tradition of Latin American liberation theology from which they emerge.

Perhaps the best place to start is to tell you how these images came to us here at FCCOL. It started several years ago, when one of our members, Eunice Mahler, came to my office with a cardboard tube she had carried back to Connecticut after a visit to a family friend living in Washington, D.C. Eunice shared with me a little of her own background - that her parents had been mission partners with the Lutheran Church in Panama, and that she herself had grown up in that country. They had befriended another couple, living and working in Nicaragua as Presbyterian mission co-workers, and it was they who, decades later, still had this collection of images in

storage. Eunice was captivated by them, and wondered if they might be loaned to FCCOL. The idea was to use them as a part of our spiritual and theological education.

When Eunice unrolled them for me that day, I was amazed by their beauty, and by their potency. I was struck by their vibrant colors and scenes, but more than that, I loved how each painting transposed the world of the Gospels into the contemporary world, helping us to understand the story in a bold new way. And I knew immediately that I wanted all of us to experience them together during the Lenten season, though I've waited for the right year to do so. This year, it turns out, is the right one.

Here's why. I've just finished reading a book that narrates the history of our current immigration crisis. It's called *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*, by Jonathan Blitzer, and I think it's a very important book for people of faith and conscience to read. It begins in the present, with the immigration policies that we're dealing with today, but it locates the roots of that impasse several decades earlier in a series of civil wars fought in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and other places in Central America that form the backdrop of the images surrounding us now. Those rebellions in the late 70's and early 80's sent waves of migrants moving toward the US, waves that really haven't relented since then. But it's also a book about the Catholic priests who supported the poor peasant communities during that era, and it's about the faith communities here in the United States who formed the first Sanctuary Movement to shelter those migrants. It is their model that we adopted seven years ago during our own Sanctuary effort, though I knew little of that history prior to reading this book. Though Solentiname isn't named in the book, it is part of the wider history that Jonathan Blitzer is narrating. In other words, though these images were produced almost fifty years ago, they exist at the origin point of a crisis we're still navigating today.

I hadn't known of Solentiname when Eunice showed me these images, but I've learned a great deal about it since then. It's a story worth knowing and I'm excited to share it with you. It was founded as an intentional community in 1966 by a Catholic priest named Ernesto Cardenal. He was ordained by the church to live and work on the island of Solentiname, and he set about getting to know the people who made their homes on the island. You can see Cardenal on the cover of your bulletins - he's depicted on the right hand side of the painting, in a white shirt and his trademark black beret. Cardenal had been trained in European theology, just the way all Catholic priests would have been. But he was alert to his context, and to the lives of the poor and indigenous people living throughout Latin America. And he began to practice an emerging form of theology percolating throughout the whole of Latin America that soon came to be called Liberation Theology.

Liberation Theology grew out of discussions among some Latin American priests and bishops during the reforms of Vatican II, which took place between 1962-1965. Emboldened by the new spirit of openness in that era, they began to think about how the church needed to respond to the very different context of places like Mexico and Nicaragua, Peru, Brazil and Argentina. Shaped by their context, these priests and bishops began to read the Bible, and especially the Gospels in a new way, noticing how the ministry of Jesus unfolded among a poor peasant class almost exactly like those in the countryside throughout Central and South America. They read the Beatitudes, for example, and they found a description of the very people they lived and worked among - those who are poor, those who mourn, those seeking justice, and they sensed a similar call to action that Elias Chacour did in Palestine: Get up, go ahead, do something, move. They read Jesus's foundational declaration of purpose at the beginning of Luke - words that we just heard - and they became certain that the Gospels were written to and for people just like those all around them. And they read about the cruelty of the Herods and the Caesars of that time, and they knew that the Bible was naming their reality too, as they struggled against regional dictators like Somoza, and their wealthy backers in the United States.

So in 1968, these Latin American bishops and priests met in Medellin, Colombia for what would be an historic conference, and they resolved on a strategy of addressing both illiteracy and poverty in Latin America by forming what they called rural base communities. It worked like this: those who were illiterate would learn to read by reading the Gospels together in light of their own situation. And then, in addition to providing literacy (which

they believed was the core feature of self-development and liberation) the base communities offered soup kitchens, co-ops, day care, as well as a place from which to demand other things, like more liveable wages and medical care. This model began to spread all over Latin America, and it transformed the way theology was understood and practiced. One of the centers for this form of theology was in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where members of our community have visited. In fact, it was there that Ernesto Cardenal was ordained a priest. The Benedictine sisters we stayed with were formed in the crucible of all of these events - which, by the way, soon spread all around the world - to countries throughout Africa, to India, to Korea, to Japan, and to North America. It's a wide panoply of theology and practice that has been nearly forgotten in our imagination of what Christian faith is and can be.

That's the background that Ernesto Cardenal and Solentiname emerged from. But Cardenal created something unique and vibrant on the island of Solentiname that stood out from other base communities. He encouraged a creativity among the people, urging them to take up artistic practices, like painting and photography, which is how the images we see before us came to be produced. And when he conducted masses, he quit giving sermons, and instead held discussions about the Gospel lessons among the people - which we see depicted in the image on our bulletins. He recorded and transcribed those discussions, and he later collected them in this book, *The Gospel in Solentiname*. Those engaged in the conversations held widely differing perspectives, Cardenal tells us - one person was mystical in her outlook, while another was very theological. One was conservative and fearful, shaped by anticommunist propaganda then being circulated, while yet another always had revolution on her mind. Story by story, passage by passage, these very wise, very thoughtful and very discerning people - who held none of the credentials we normally use to signal expertise - these deeply soulful followers of the way of Christ created an extraordinary testament together.

Little by little, word about Solentiname got out, and it reached the Somoza regime. At one point in 1978, several members of Solentiname participated in a failed revolt against the regime, which had been using para-military squads to hunt down its enemies. The army retaliated by razing Solentiname, sending Cardenal and many of its members into hiding. But it wasn't long before the tide shifted, and the Nicaraguan people forced Somoza from power. On the night that he fled the bunker where he had been hiding, a group of people flooded into that bunker, and they found on Somoza's nightstand a copy of this very book - *The Gospel in Solentiname*. One of those who entered the bunker happened to be a cousin of Ernesto Cardenal, and she brought the book to him. Cardenal found that Somoza himself had underlined a passage from a discussion about Herod after being visited by the wise men. One of the Solentiname residents had said (and here was the underlined passage): "He must have felt hatred and envy. Because dictators have always believed they were gods. They think they are the only ones, and cannot allow anyone to be above them." Why exactly Somoza underlined that passage is unclear. Perhaps it was a kind of confessional self-recognition. Or, it might have been an identification with Herod's form of rule. Wherever the truth lies, Somoza died in exile a year later, while Ernesto Cardenal went on to have a long public ministry. He died in 2020 at the age of 95. Solentiname itself went on to be rebuilt. I understand it's changed since the 1970's, but there's still an artistic community there, and there's still a church. Who knows - one of these years we might pay them a visit.

What might we learn from the story and art of Solentiname now? Why might it be important for our own Lenten journey? First, I think it can help us in our efforts to transpose the events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth into our own time. The images subtly suggest that the Bible isn't merely narrating an event that occurred long ago. It's something that happens throughout human history. Jesus comes in many guises and shows up in many different forms - Jesus himself said as much, in Matthew 25. If, as the images suggest, Jesus took the form of a dispossessed peasant in the 1970's, where might we see him now? How might these images be painted now? Perhaps an artist would depict him as an undocumented worker from Central America being picked up by ICE. Perhaps he would be shown standing mute before a judge in some federal court house - our versions of Pilate. Perhaps he would be painted being shuttled between detention centers - our own via Dolorosa, our

homegrown way of the cross. Perhaps the moment of deportation itself would be the crucifixion. What would it mean to begin to read our current situation as itself an unfolding event in the life of God incarnate? For my part, I have begun to imagine it in precisely that way. I do want you to hear that I've been meeting regularly with teams of people who are working on a coordinated response to this crisis. And I'll have more to report about it very soon, I hope.

Second, what if Solentiname was a prototype for the kind of community churches everywhere were called to build? And what if it were so at FCCOL? Clarence Jordan famously called Koinonia Farm down in Georgia a "demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God." I think Solentiname was another such demonstration plot. What I find so inspiring about Ernesto Cardenal's vision, and of liberation theology more broadly, is that it engaged the entirety of the human person. It engaged the mind with practices of literacy, of reading together, but it also did so through discussion and debate, through food preparation and eating, through expressions of creativity, through worship, and last but not least, through public action and public witness. There is no part of our lives that God does not seek to actualize, and Cardenal sensed that. In this era of a flattened cultural life, where we read less and less, where we feel ever more lonely and isolated, where, little by little, we have forgotten how to create things, I believe that a church community - this church community! - could model itself on a place like Solentiname. As we imagine new directions for our church throughout this spring, I would hope that Solentiname might be a model we refer to.

But finally, to contemplate these images throughout the season of Lent is to be reminded of the most basic part of the Christian story: that God enters the human situation and dwells with us. God enters the darkness and pain that human beings everywhere have known. Including yours. Including mine. If these paintings don't reflect our own daily reality here in Old Lyme, they still serve to remind us that God continually enters our situation: in the places where we have felt accused, or made to feel inadequate by some authority - God meets us there; in the places where we are carrying burdens too heavy to bear - God finds us there; in the places where we feel paralyzed by fear - God seeks us there; in the places where we feel exposed, or shamed, rendered naked before the world - God precedes us there; in the places where our bodies betray us or in the places that we feel entombed - God reaches for us even there, enfolding us in love, helping us to make it through. The genius of Christian faith has been to insist that God has come to those places not just once upon a time, in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The paintings of Solentiname insist that God does so continually, in just the way you or I, or a peasant community in Nicaragua, might require. Each in our own way, God comes to find us in the places we need it most. That's something of what I see in these paintings.

I hope that during this Lenten season you're able to spend some time reflecting on these images from Solentiname. I'm eager to know what you see and feel as you study them. I hope they serve to broaden our own imagination of what Christian faith can look like, and I hope they might serve as a kind of formation for our work of spiritual diplomacy. So too, I hope they lead us all to consider how we too might exemplify some of the qualities of this extraordinary community - its creativity, but also its sense of agency - to get up, go ahead, do something and move. But more than anything, I hope that by gazing upon this sacred art, we might move closer to God and to one another. Amen.