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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Luke 10: 25-37; I Corinthians 1 and 2 (Selected Passages)

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“The Deported God”

We are in the season of Lent, and so I'm going to begin today in the same fashion with which the Apostle Paul starts in his letter to the Corinthian church - that is to say, intensely. I hope you'll hear me out.

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified,” Paul wrote to the Corinthian church toward the beginning of that letter. It's a strange and, from a certain vantage, a troubling statement, given how later generations of Christians have sought to outdo one another in demonstrating just how graphically they could render that event. As if the world didn't have to contend with enough horror, followers of Jesus have placed an instrument of torture at the center of their - our - religious understanding, and in some parts of the world, a bloodied figure remains there, twisting in pain for all to see. Indeed, during the Lenten season, such images are arrayed all around our Meetinghouse, with the image of the crucifixion itself as one of the more arresting images of them all.

Still, it is a peculiar thing among the world's religions to place such a graphic image at the center of our understanding of God. I will confess that I am sympathetic with those who find it distasteful, or ethically questionable. That an instrument of torture should excite religious devotion the world over is, to put it mildly, strange. That is, among other reasons, why we don't have a cross prominently displayed in our Meetinghouse. It's worth lingering with the question of whether centuries of contemplation of such images have served to increase Christian compassion, or whether they have rendered the world more cruel by instilling notions of divine, redemptive violence into our collective imaginations. It's a question I find more worrisome the older I become.

And yet, with Luther, with many of the Reformers, with Jurgen Moltmann (who wrote an indispensable book called *The Crucified God*) and with a Japanese novelist named Shusaku Endo, I find myself drawn to Paul's statement in his letter. And I find myself drawn to the God revealed upon the cross. Despite some concerted efforts over the years, I have never succeeded in freeing myself from that image, from that gaze, and from the assurance that somehow it conveys something good and true and hopeful to the world.

It was in Cuba, less than two weeks ago, that I encountered anew the figure on the cross, sitting in the cathedral church of Santiago. Tears were streaking my face, and I felt, as if for the first time, the compassionate reach of that gaze. In the time that remains, I'd like to tell you how it came to be that I was sitting in that cathedral, weeping, staring at Jesus on the cross. It's a difficult story to tell, but it's one you need to hear, because it has to do with you, too.

Here's the story. Amidst the rolling blackouts we experienced in Cuba, wifi access was even more rare than I had imagined. In truth, it was kind of wonderful. For the most part, I couldn't scroll on my phone, receive calls, send texts, read or respond to emails, catch up on news - none of it. With the exception of about 15 minutes every morning, that is. That's when my brother, who was along on the journey, rigged up a wifi hotspot on our bus that several of us were able to use so long as the bus remained in or around Santiago. I mostly used the time to send quick messages to Rachael and the kids. But on one of the mornings, I was stunned to see a string of texts flash by as my phone downloaded all the messages that had piled up the previous night. The messages flew by and I had to go back to absorb what I thought I had just read. And I fairly gasped.

"Oh my God...Malik and Zahida have been deported."

For those of you who weren't yet around, Malik Naveed bin Rehman and Zahida Altaf lived here in our church for eight months back in 2018. They courageously refused their order of deportation that year, and entered Sanctuary with us while their legal appeal was being pursued. And I must tell you, those were some of the most challenging, but also some of the most precious moments I've ever experienced as a minister. Our church came together to support this family, and we created what Rebecca Solnit called "a paradise built in hell." We had vigils and prayer services, but as often as not, we simply had impromptu dinner parties and conversations over tea that left us doubled over with laughter. The whole thing started gaining a kind of positive notoriety, to the point that the writer Dave Eggers surprised us one weekend, showing up to write a profile of the case for *The New Yorker*. We were, during those eight months, a church in the power of the Spirit, and I sometimes wonder if I'll ever again experience something that was at one and the same time so painful, so laden with fear and anxiety, and yet also so paradoxically wonderful.

It all came to a crescendo when we sensed, after a series of legal appeals, a sliver of an opening with ICE. One October afternoon, after a vigil here with Senator Blumenthal, Malik, Zahida, and I drove up to Hartford together to see if we were right. Sure enough, ICE cut the electronic monitor off of Malik's ankle, and told them they were free to return to their lives. They would still have to check in with ICE, but their legal case had been frozen by the courts. Since that time, they've lived in New Britain, and they have thrived. In the intervening years, they would visit here, and we would visit there, most recently about a month ago. They are our family.

Let me take you back to Cuba now. Sitting there on the bus, my jaw went slack at the news, and I stared into empty space for a long time, stunned. Disbelief, and then stinging tears were my first response. That was followed by a mounting sense of fury. Fury at what our country is becoming, fury - and I apologize if I offend anyone, but I am speaking from the heart - fury at the cruelty and inhumanity of our President and the enablers surrounding him, fury and outrage at what these policies are doing to ordinary people, and to their families. And then sorrow and confusion - that so many otherwise good and well meaning people can't be troubled to care. Perhaps it is that sorrow and righteous anger spring from the same place in the human heart.

Rereading the messages later, a more nuanced, but no less devastating picture emerged. Both Malik and Zahida had been scheduled to visit ICE later in the week for their annual check in. Their case remained closed. But they had seen the behavior of the new administration. They had seen the images of people in prisons and camps in El Salvador, in Guantanamo, in Texas and Louisiana, and they didn't want to be among them. They dreaded the all too real possibility of being dumped unceremoniously in an airport somewhere they had never been. And so they left on their own terms. They're now back in Pakistan, where they'll be for the foreseeable future. They assure us that they're doing ok. In choosing as they did, they retained their own autonomy. This way, their agency and their dignity remained intact. It's not the outcome they wished, but neither is it the worst that could have befallen them. For that, we can be at least somewhat grateful.

Our bus soon arrived at the Cathedral Church of Santiago, where we were scheduled for a visit. We filed in and then scattered ourselves around its sanctuary space. I felt unfocused, and so I sat alone in the nave, and thought about our friends and all that we had shared together. That's when the image of the crucified Christ, a large statuesque form hanging above the altar, began to fill my imagination, almost as though it were speaking. Four distinct thoughts emerged as I gazed upon that image.

The first was that crucifixion takes many forms, and it felt to me then, and it feels to me now, that our friends Malik and Zahida have been forced to undergo a very modern, very contemporary form of crucifixion. It's true, their biological lives have been spared, but as in the Bible, so now, the state has engineered a form of torment that has separated them from everything they have known and loved. There in Santiago, the crucified Christ spoke to that lived reality, shared with every other person now facing deportation, humiliation, and exile. "You are seeing, now, what happened to your friends," the image seemed to say.

But then second, it became clear in that setting just why the image of the crucified One speaks so directly to those living throughout Latin America. You don't have to read too deeply into the history of the southern hemisphere to encounter the wars, the exploitation, the poverty, and the pain to understand why so many throughout Latin America would identify with the figure on the cross. It is an expression of their lived reality. They have felt the pain of the cross in their own lives. This is an image that has helped people articulate their own most acute losses, while sensing that God has chosen to share that reality with them. "You are now seeing the reality of much of Latin America," the image seemed to say.

Third, it suddenly felt clear that what had happened to Malik and Zahida was somehow connected to the deprivation and hardship we were encountering throughout Cuba. For more than sixty years now, the US has imposed an economic embargo on the island that has done little to change the political situation there. The result has been a shortage of food, fuel, and medical supplies for ordinary Cubans. It is a response that mirrors, almost exactly, what happened to Haiti 200 years ago, when enslaved people shocked the world by freeing themselves, and when the US and other world powers subsequently cut Haiti off from all trade. 31 times now the UN has voted, almost unanimously, on a resolution calling on the US to end its embargo. Most recently, in 2023, only the US and Israel voted against the resolution. You don't have to support the policies of the Castro or post-Castro regime, any

more than you need to support the policies of any number of other states that we do in fact trade with, to see the damage the embargo has inflicted on people's lives. That too, has been a form of crucifixion. The cross, then, began to suggest the need to be oriented toward all of those, near and far, who through no fault of their own, have been forced to undergo crucifixions - in Cuba, in Haiti, in Palestine, or here in the US. "These are people that I love, and that I walk alongside," the one on the cross seemed to say.

But fourth and finally, the cross suggested a promise delivered unto the world by God - a promise that even in the worst hells that humans create, that God consents to go there, so as not to leave us alone. It is the promise that God has entered our situation, whosoever and wheresoever we may be, and that God has covenanted to walk through the pain with us, until we learn to quit inflicting it upon one another. The cross therefore serves as a summons to those who gaze upon it, to accompany one another through the darkness even as God accompanies us, to refuse to turn away from the wreckage of the world even as God refuses to turn away. The cross serves as an invitation to do what we can to care for one another. "Lo, I am with you always," the man on the cross seemed to say.

All of which begs the question: how are we to respond to the crisis of forced disappearances now? How are we to care for the immigrants whose lives and families are being wrecked? For those of us who organize our faith around the image of a crucified man, how are we to take care of our neighbors, who are now undergoing their own forms of crucifixion? It's a question that we as ministers, together with those in the legal and advocacy communities, have been agonizing over. This morning, I can tell you at last that a plan is taking shape.

It looks different this time around. So far at least, churches are not considered safe spaces for those threatened with deportation, and so no one, at least for the time being, is looking to use churches as a Sanctuary space. That could change. For now, we're building a three-fold, state-wide strategy to meet the needs of those who are now most vulnerable, those who, in one way or another, are facing this contemporary form of crucifixion.

First, we're creating a network of people who will engage in detention visits - what will look like prison ministry. According to those who have undergone the experience, the worst effect of detention is the feeling of being absolutely cut off from all outside support. Family and friends can't risk visiting, because as often as not, they're vulnerable to detention too. And very few people have legal representation. And so they feel alone and utterly forgotten. What we're doing is to build a system that will allow clergy and other volunteers - including people in churches - to be matched with individuals in detention, to visit them, and to reassure them that they have not been forgotten. This creates a line of communication with the outside, allowing communication both with family and with legal counsel. If someone is picked up in Connecticut and imprisoned in Texas or Louisiana, it will involve working with people of faith and conscience there who will visit. Likewise, we may be asked to do the same for those picked up in Texas, say, and imprisoned in Massachusetts or New Hampshire, which are the detention facilities closest to us. So the first line of response is to be a sign of hope and humanity for those on the inside, helping them to know that they are not forgotten.

The second response is to take care of the families left behind. They will be - they are - traumatized by what has happened to their husbands or their wives, their cousins or their children. They'll have material needs. They may need rides, they may need groceries, and they may need other things too. More than anything, though, they'll have spiritual and emotional needs. We're creating teams of people from faith institutions who will reach out to those families, who will visit them and listen to them, and who will fold them into a wider human community that lets them know that they have not been abandoned.

And third, we're working to imagine how best to support the children and young people whose parents are detained. You can well imagine the agony that they feel, as family members are rounded up and disappeared from their lives. For not a few of them, there's a sense of shame at school, and there are precious few who understand what it is they are going through. And so there's a need to create support groups, meant exclusively for young people whose parents or caregivers have been taken. The hope is to facilitate opportunities for them to interact and to hear from one another, maybe especially in summer activity programs.

Here's where you come in. I've been attending the planning meetings at which these proposals are being worked out. And I have confidently predicted that a whole host of people from FCCOL and our wider community could be enlisted to help in each of these three areas. We're not quite underway yet, but when we are, we need a list of volunteers willing to be mobilized in each area. I'll say this too: we need one, or perhaps two, people with some organizational skills, who could coordinate our efforts. Many among us have been looking for ways to channel our energies. Here you go. Here is a way.

There are three clip boards on the communion table, and if you're interested and willing, you're invited to place your names on one or two or all three volunteer lists. And if you have it within you to help to organize our efforts as a church community, please let me know. This is going to work, or not, through the commitment of lay volunteers.

I'll end by returning to that moment when I sat in a Cuban cathedral, staring at the image of the crucified Christ. I was comforted then by what felt like the presence of God, reassuring me - and all of the world - that in this terrible moment we have not been abandoned, that we are not alone. With the Apostle Paul, I resolved to know little else. And then I recalled the words that we used the Sunday prior to our departure for Cuba, words that Elias Chacour used when translating the parables: get up, go ahead, do something, move! There in Santiago, I sensed those words once again, this time as if spoken by Jesus himself.

When it was time, I wiped the tears away and I collected myself. I rose from the pew. I got up and I moved. Right back here to you.

So let's go ahead, you and I. Let's do something. Let's move.