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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Ruth 1: 15-18; 2 Corinthians 5: 17-18
April 6, 2025

“Ministries of Reconciliation: Reports on Cuba”

In the Afro-Cuban world, the dead are never remote. They are always near at hand. They guide, they support, they rebuke, they intervene, they encourage. Through rituals and dance, through sacrifice and sometimes through possession, those in the land of the living call forth those who have departed this world. To travel through the Afro-Cuban landscape is to be surrounded, from morning to evening, by the dead - a communion of the saints as our tradition has it.

In our context, that may sound spooky or macabre, but it is neither of those. It is a gathering of your most intimate lost loved ones - your parents and your grandparents, your aunts and uncles, your teachers and mentors, and, at times, perhaps, even by your own children. Afro-Cuban rituals and songs are memory devices, in which all that has been lost is ritually regathered and recomposed into an eternal present. That's a heroic act given the upheavals and traumas of African descended peoples in Cuba, and throughout the Americas. As long as the drums shall last, the world can be preserved, whole and intact. On the other hand, should the drums ever recede from memory, should the rituals ever fade into obscurity, so too would all those lost loved ones, the ancestors - they would slowly begin to vanish. The living would be abandoned to a spiritually denuded and amnesiac realm, filled with cheap consumer products, filled with Anglophone pop music, but shorn of meaning, shorn of history, shorn of the eternal. Shorn of all the loved ones. Keeping the drums and the rituals alive is, quite literally, a matter of eternal consequence.

For ten days, members and friends of FCCOL traveled through a land of heroic retrieval, where rhythms were themselves shrines of living memory, cathedrals in which generations have gathered for spiritual protection and shelter. For ten days, the sound of drums were with us wherever we turned. And for ten days, we were surrounded by the lost loved ones - ours and those we had never met. The membrane between the living and the dead grew thin.

That was the spirituality that formed the backdrop of everything we did and saw in Eastern Cuba. But it was that charged spiritual environment that made me highly aware of our own lost loved ones here in Old Lyme. In particular, David Good was often on my mind as we traveled. David served as senior minister here at FCCOL for 37 years, and he was a trusted friend to many of us here. It was a year ago this past week that David died.

And so as a way to honor him and to bring him close once again, I'd like to both open and close our meditations on Cuba this morning with two passages from David's sermons. They both articulate beautifully the reasons for our visit to Cuba.

In a sermon preached in 2001, after a visit to the Cheyenne River Reservation, David referenced the famous story of Ruth and Naomi. They come from different lands, different peoples, and different religious customs, David reminded our congregation, and they were often at war with one another. Ruth, from a neighboring tribe, becomes stranded among the Hebrews, but when she is offered the opportunity to return to her own people, she makes a beautiful declaration to Naomi, who has sheltered her. You probably know her famous words:

“Where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

Tragically, we in Christendom have tended to imagine those words as ever and always being spoken *to* us, as traditional peoples throughout the world have been asked, often at gunpoint, to adopt *our* God, and *our* way of life. David’s profound insight was to reverse that movement. For David, Christian mission was not simply about partnering with churches in other parts of the world (important though that can be), and it certainly wasn’t about getting people to think and believe the way we do. Rather, it was about building relationships of trust and friendship with traditional peoples in different parts of the world, many of whom have been afflicted by the worst histories of settler-colonial violence. And it was about opening oneself, in a spirit of genuine curiosity and reverence, in order to first appreciate, and then to love, what those afflicted communities have most loved. What if, instead of expecting others to quote Ruth’s lines back to us, David asks, we were the ones who said to our Lakota friends, or our Muslim friends, our Haitian friends, or our Cuban friends, “where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God?” Doing so might actually bring us closer to the true Spirit of Jesus, and to the core of biblical faith.

David writes: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if this were the final chapter in all the warring tribes of the earth? We simply cannot imagine, and we must never underestimate what wonderfully healing words those are. ‘Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.’”

That was true of our Green Grass Partnership, but it also represents the spirit of the journey we made to Cuba, where African descended practices like Vodou, Santeria, and Palo can be found. Centuries of colonialist and racist assumptions have stigmatized those practices, but in fact, they have been one of the principal means by which African descended peoples have not only survived in a hostile new environment, but have thrived. My own first exposure to this world came at the age of 17, when I visited West Africa with a group of Presbyterians. I came away with a passion that sometimes waxed and sometimes waned in the intervening years, but that was powerfully rekindled when I visited, in quick succession, New Orleans, and then Western Cuba, and then Haiti, on my first journey with the Crosbys. I sensed then, and I sense now, a beauty and a vitality in these expressions of humanity, and I have wished to learn from their wisdom. I’ve also wished to invite you, insofar as you’re willing, to join me in that learning. It is a part of our anti-racist work in this community, and it represents an approach that few other churches have tried. Wherever we went in Cuba, the fact that we came from a church, and still more a Protestant church, was a surprise. A welcome surprise, but a surprise nevertheless.

Each in our own way, with the accents falling in different places for each one of us, travelers from FCCOL sought to exemplify those healing words from the book of Ruth: “Your people shall be my people. Your God shall be my God.” That’s the spirit of humility in which we sought to travel, and it’s in that spirit that I invite several members of our group to share now.

(Lisa Feltes, Becky Crosby, Susan Switzer)

I’ll end where I began: our lost loved ones are never far from us, but especially in the Afro-Cuban world that we inhabited for a short time. With that in mind, let’s finish with another of David Good’s insights, this time from the Sunday immediately following September 11th. He was reflecting upon an interfaith prayer service held between a Christian minister, a rabbi, and an imam right after that awful day. Here’s what he said:

We, in all of our religious traditions, need to venture out to the boundaries of our faith, for it is only at those boundaries that we will be able to join hands with people of other traditions. I see that this is happening in the collective unconscious of the human family. We’re tired of dwelling on all the things that divide us; we want to seek out those things that bind us together.

And then he continues:

Are we strong enough in our Christian faith that we can venture out to the boundaries of our faith and join hands with our brothers and sisters of other religious traditions?

Or, to put it another way, are we deep enough in our own faith that we can go down below the ground water of our own particular tradition, way down to the spiritual aquifers that run beneath all the religions of this earth?

For those who are searching for a tradition in which to be anchored in this time of tempests, the Christian tradition can be a source of strength and nourishment. May you have the courage to trust that here, there is something that is the opposite of sectarian - something that can connect you to all the peoples of the world. Conversely, for those among us who are already firmly rooted within the Christian faith, I would encourage us to trust that a lasting commitment to Christian faith does not need to cancel out the truths of other faiths. Indeed, to explore the Black Atlantic traditions, as we did in Cuba, and as we have done in New Orleans, in Haiti, and in West Africa, is to find how much our traditions share, and how connected we are as a human family. It’s a move that our own lost loved one, David Good, taught us throughout his life.

And so, in this new age of hostility and division, let us keep finding ways to move toward the boundaries of our faith in these ministries of reconciliation, joining hands with our brothers and sisters of other faith traditions, as we did in Cuba. And let us keep on venturing below the ground water of our own particular tradition, to the spiritual aquifers running beneath us, joining us to the rest of humanity. Amen.