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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Deuteronomy 30: 11-14; Philippians 1: 1-11
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Some Churches I Have Loved

A few weeks ago, a small group composed of members of our church Boards, along with some parents and young people, gathered together on a Sunday afternoon to talk about FCCOL, and churches more broadly. It was part of an effort to imagine how we might tell our story more effectively, and how to reach out to people who may not know who we are. I was especially heartened, and inspired, by the voices of our young people, who shared what our church means to them. Like many people these days, they're a little wary of religion - of how it often tends to imply a regressive or reactionary set of social values. And yet they loved our church. It felt different, they said, and they appreciated how FCCOL encouraged them to be more expansive in both their thinking and their actions. They spoke about serving those who had been unhoused or displaced in New York City, or in New London, and what that experience meant to them. They spoke about the civil rights era, and what they had learned together on a journey through the South. And they talked about our church's open and affirming stance, our embrace of all kinds of family structures, all kinds of bodies, all kinds of ways of finding and receiving love in this world.

It might have been just one more church meeting - and we don't lack for meetings around here - but I think most of us who were a part of that conversation left feeling uplifted, and maybe even celebratory. I know I did. It made me feel intensely grateful for all of you, and for this place. I felt grateful for who we are, and for who we're still becoming.

In that spirit of gratitude, what I'd like to do this morning is take you on a whirlwind tour of some churches I have loved in my life, churches worth celebrating. It's true - I have, of late, found it necessary to critique what many churches have become, but I admit to feeling a little dissatisfied on the whole with those critiques. They are, really, a *cri de coeur*, a cry of the heart, from one who actually loves and cares about this form of practice. Like many of you, I have been nurtured and shaped for the better by the people, by the habits, and by the visions emerging from churches, and I wish to pay homage to that. But I also wish to draw lessons from each of them, as we celebrate FCCOL on this Sunday.

First stop: I'm going to drop us down in Middletown, Ohio, where we'll visit the First Presbyterian Church of that small city. In the summer of 1987, when Ronald Reagan was still president and when MTV still felt vaguely transgressive, our family moved from Carlisle, Pennsylvania to this midwestern steel town that would later produce a vice president. We had previously been a part of a conservative evangelical world that never fully worked for our family. And yet, when we moved, inherited assumptions from evangelicalism persisted for me, well into college. In Middletown, I led a kind of double life. Even though our family was active

in the Presbyterian church, I often visited some of the megachurches that some of my friends attended. These were churches that were, by and large, certain that the world was in decline, certain that Jesus was coming back soon, certain that secular culture was rotten, certain that the Bible was the literal word of God, and above all, certain that they were right. They were also slick and contemporary, and savvy about the use of spectacle to attract and maintain attention.

The Presbyterians were different. They weren't slick or especially contemporary. It was a church filled with people who worked at the steel mill, mostly as managers, but as laborers too. There were teachers there, as well as dentists and lawyers and folks who worked out at the mall. They weren't academic, really, but they were thoughtful, and humane. They were community oriented and engaged. They weren't frightened by what they found in the world, but were generally curious about it, wishing to find the good around them. There were caring adults there who exercised patience with me, who never told me I was wrong, but who quietly modeled a different kind of Christian faith than what I was then tempted by.

Their influence seeped in steadily. One time, a retired man I admired caught me after a service, and told me he had just read Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth*, and that he thought it was marvelous and thought I might like it too. And so I read it. Another time a minister listened as I described my confusion after seeing Spike Lee's film about Malcolm X, in which Malcolm has a religious vision that leads him toward Islam. I'm embarrassed to say it now, but at that point in my life, it wasn't the God I was familiar with, and so I shared with this minister my suspicion that whatever happened to Malcolm must have been a hallucination, at which point the minister just said, "Are you sure? Why couldn't it be God?" And just like that, something tiny and yet enormous began to shift within me. On still another occasion, I attended a service during a weekend home from college. An older emeritus minister preached a sermon that I'll never forget - it was learned and wise, but most of all, it was imbued with a grace that felt utterly different from the evangelical voices I was then surrounded by, voices which, by then, were filling me with a feeling of claustrophobia. Over time, it became clear to me that this congregation of thoughtful and decent and engaged people were my people. In a part of the country now at the epicenter of a new form of political extremism, I credit the First Presbyterian Church of Middletown, Ohio for showing me a different path, one to which I remain committed to this day.

The lesson I would have us absorb from this first stop on our tour is the possibility that we here in Old Lyme may be sowing similar kinds of seeds even now, simply by being who we are. Just as in my adolescence there were seductive but narrow versions of Christian faith luring young and old alike, so today there are similar voices out there, now amplified, possessing greater cultural sway. I'm encouraged to believe that, like the Presbyterians in Middletown, simply modeling an alternative form of faith here at FCCOL may be enough to make a difference in somebody's life. It can be hard to discern close up and in real time, but never underestimate the power of a dedicated and thoughtful group of church members to alter the course of someone's life.

Now let me teleport us to an entirely different part of the world, to a church I've only recently become acquainted with. I've never been there, but I hope to visit someday. This is the Basilica

of St. Peter in the Golden Sky, located in Pavia, in the north of Italy. I became acquainted with this church through a chain of associations beginning with our readings of Dante, and I've been fascinated by it ever since. In the tenth canto of the *Paradiso*, Dante encounters a group of luminaries from the history of theology. Among them is Boethius, a 6th century author of a book called *The Consolation of Philosophy*. I had never read the book, and so a few years ago I made my way through it, and I was powerfully moved by what I found. Boethius lived and wrote in a time of profound cultural transition, when the Roman Empire had all but collapsed, and when the books and learning of an older era were being lost. Boethius was deeply Christian, and he was deeply pious, but he also believed that Greek wisdom needed to be salvaged for later generations. And so he set about translating Plato and Aristotle, as well as a host of others. It's largely thanks to Boethius that we still have those books.

In 523, Boethius was imprisoned on suspicion of insufficient loyalty to the ruler of that time, a man named Theodoric. It was from prison that Boethius wrote his great book, now a classic of prison literature, but also a pivotal piece of philosophy and theology. But here's what I find so extraordinary about it. Boethius has been canonized - he is now a saint. He was, as I say, passionately devoted to his faith. But the book he wrote while awaiting execution makes no mention of Jesus, or indeed, of Christianity. Instead, it uses the language and symbols of Greek philosophy to communicate the importance of the pursuit of wisdom, even in the face of death. Across the centuries, some have wondered if it amounts to a repudiation of Christianity by Boethius - why would Lady Philosophy be his guide as his life approaches the end, rather than Jesus, or Mary?

Scholars now believe that Boethius was engaged in what would later come to be known as mediational theology - accepting and adopting the language of those to whom Christian faith was unintelligible, writing in such a way that commonalities could be established. His writing helped to inaugurate a tradition and practice within theology of breaking down cultural barriers, so that those operating with different languages and rituals and symbol systems could find and affirm one another. Instead of doubling down on his own dogmatic beliefs, in other words, Boethius wrote in such a way that his readers would be encouraged to absorb the classical wisdom that was being discarded all around them. Boethius is the patron saint of all of those who would later say: there is no contradiction between the sacred truths of theology and so called "secular" traditions of learning or culture. Being a person of faith need not entail a rejection of other forms of learning, or indeed, other forms of faith. Boethius leads to Aquinas and Aquinas leads to Schleiermacher and Schleiermacher leads to Tillich and Tillich leads to the kind of theology and practice that we're engaged in here at FCCOL. We don't double down on our own version of truth, and we don't cloak ourselves in the armor of dogma and beliefs and Bible verses. Instead, we seek commonalities across our differences through the work of translation, synthesis, and mediation. That instinct, which shapes so much of who we are at FCCOL, comes from Boethius.

Now back to Pavia, and to the Basilica of St. Peter in the Golden Sky. It's the place where Boethius was buried, and it also contains the remains of St. Augustine. That alone makes it worthy of our pilgrimage this morning. But inside, the apse of the church, just above the altar,

we find one of the most astonishing mosaic tileworks anywhere in the world. As you know, mosaics are formed by arranging small, broken fragments together, piece by piece, to make what are often stunningly beautiful images or designs. Though the mosaic in the Basilica dates to several centuries after Boethius, it is a perfect metaphor for the work that Boethius inaugurated. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” T.S. Eliot wrote in “The Waste Land.” So it is with both Boethius and the Basilica, where fragments from the past have been gathered into a powerful and luminous new arrangement.

And is that not our work as well? Can we not sense something of our own calling in this ancient basilica, containing the remains of a dead saint who labored to bridge cultures, to unite disparate parts of the human family, to find a common language with which to address one another? Let this be our second lesson: to discover fragments of a discarded and shattered past, arranging them into mosaic-like work of both beauty and resistance. Even if the architecture of FCCOL and that of St. Peter in the Golden Sky is vastly different, perhaps it shall be said of us one day that here was a place that, in yet another time of cultural transition and upheaval, where scraps and remainders, comprising the best aspects of our religious traditions and wisdom practices, were fashioned into something new and beautiful.

The third and final stop on our tour must be brief, and so I shall now transport us, in a flash, to Coventry Cathedral, in England. I had occasion to visit Coventry more than 30 years ago, while in college, and the vision of its cathedral has remained with me ever since. The Cathedral at Coventry is really two structures, joined symbolically. The first is the shell of the old cathedral, which was destroyed by German bombs in 1940. The second is a modern structure emerging from the ruins of the first. Rather than simply rebuilding what had been lost, the leaders at Coventry chose to leave the ruins as they were, as a testament to the barbarity that human beings too often visit upon one another. But they wished to suggest that destruction didn’t convey the entirety of the human story. Resurrection, Restorative Justice, and Reconciliation are possibilities that can and do emerge after the worst has occurred. And so both the modern and the remains of the medieval structure bear symbols suggesting that possibility: a bent cross, behind which the words “Father, forgive them,” are inscribed; a bronze sculpture of two people embracing, entitled “Reconciliation”; a Chapel of Unity within the new building, working to bridge the religious divides that have kept human beings alienated from one another. The mission of the cathedral is to heal the painful wounds of history through the work of restoration and reconciliation, a mission which is, unfortunately, ever more relevant and pressing.

From Coventry, we rediscover our vocation to bear witness to the inhumanity that too often afflicts our world, while accepting our vocation to practice a ministry of healing and of reconciliation, seemingly impossible realities that faith helps to make real. Let that be our third lesson for the morning.

And so yes, there are strong reasons to be critical of churches these days. But there are stronger, and, I think, better reasons to recall the goodness that has emerged from churches across the decades, and across the centuries. We need those reminders now. Reminders of the decency, of

the healing, of the saving work that has grown and still does grow from gatherings of faithful and committed people.

Which brings us back, at last, to FCCOL, another of the churches I have loved. Indeed, it is the one I have loved most of all. I have personal reasons for loving it - for loving you. You have given our family a home, after all, and have helped to nurture our children. You've allowed me to think and to grow alongside of you. But above all, you've exhibited a fresh and surprising boldness that I haven't seen anywhere else, even among the very best congregations. Like the Presbyterian Church in Middletown, you model a gracious alternative to the dominant strains of Christian expression, and you sow seeds among the old and the young alike that help them to find a foothold in a confusing and scary time. Like the basilica in Pavia, you're accustomed to discovering fragments of wisdom wherever they might exist, and arranging them into a life giving pattern that reminds us of the best we're called to be. And like the Cathedral in Coventry, you do not flinch before the painful realities of the human story, while courageously trusting the work of reconciliation and healing begun in the ministry of Jesus.

Most of you have received pledge cards in the mail by now. If you haven't, you can find them in your pews as well. We would love if everyone was able to give at least a little, and maybe more than a little, to the ongoing work of FCCOL. Speaking for our family, we've pledged \$3,500 to the work of this congregation for the coming year. Given the realities of raising children, and given the expenses of college tuition (with about a decade more of such expenses yet to come), there are some days that it feels like a lot. But then given all that we receive from this place, and given the role that FCCOL plays in our region and far beyond, it seems like far too little. Still, it represents the importance that we place upon the ministries and mission of The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme.

I am confident of this, the Apostle Paul writes to the church at Philippi, that the one who began a good work in you will complete it. I share that confidence. I hope you do too.