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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: John 1: 43-51; John 20: 24-29
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Come In From the Cold

I know we never will be perfect
 Never entirely clear
 We get hurt and we just panic
 And we strike out, out of fear
 I fear the sentence of this solitude
 200 years on hold
 And all we ever wanted
 Was just to come in from the cold

-Joni Mitchell, "Come In From the Cold"

When our daughter Sabina was very young, we took her to an open house at a pre-school in New Haven. Kids could gather and play, becoming accustomed to the space and to one another, while parents still remained close. At one point, a teacher got out a guitar and invited all the kids into a cluster in front of her. She sang to them, and asked them to move about a little bit, and most everyone joined in. Rachael and I watched our daughter. Sabina stood very tentatively outside the small huddle of kids, looking as if she might like to join, but as though she wasn't sure if she could. She hovered, tiny and so small. She rocked back and forth on her feet, making up her mind. Little by little, she edged closer, until at last she was a part of things, singing along.

I shared that story a little later with my grandfather, and he smiled knowingly. "I remember a moment when you did exactly the same thing," he told me. "You were little," he said, "just like Sabina. He proceeded to tell of how, one evening, his sister was visiting from out of town. After dinner, she had gathered some of the kids around her to tell stories, and everyone went except for me. "You were over at the edge, not quite sure if you wanted to join or not. And as she told those stories, little by little, you slowly advanced forward, drawn in by what you were hearing. Until at last you were right at her feet, absorbed in the stories." He then continued: "It was like you wanted to join, but didn't know how, or you didn't know if it was for you. But you found your way, to where you had been invited, and to where you actually wanted to be."

Maybe it's hardwired into me, but that's how I've been most of my life about joining things - clubs, groups, even the church. Especially the church. It took me longer to get ordained than most of my peers. What took them three years took me ten. And it took me a while to edge my way toward accepting a call to serve a church as well, even though I sensed that it was to the church, to this form of life - and not to the university - that I was most powerfully drawn. In a way, I'm still that little child, not sure if he belongs, not sure if he wants to belong, but gradually edging closer and closer to an invitation that has been extended.

Do any of you ever feel like that? Perhaps it's fear of giving ourselves over to something larger than we are. Or perhaps it's a fear of rejection, that our desire to belong will actually be met with indifference. Maybe it's a deep seated anxiety that we'll join something, only to find

that whatever idiosyncracies we possess will mean that we don't really fit, and that we can't be our full selves. Or maybe it's that every organization, every group, every form of belonging has written its codes of membership in such a way that we know, deep down, that some part of us isn't welcome there, even if, externally, we're told that we fit. Or maybe it's that the things that many of us have belonged to have left us disappointed, or have proven to be dangerous, and so we don't want to risk drawing closer.

I think that's what a lot of us feel, deep down, about joining things, but perhaps especially about joining a church. A number of you made the decision to join FCCOL today, and we're so heartened that you did. And I don't fully know the stories that led to that decision this morning, but I suspect, as with many people here, it's been a process, and maybe a long one. Not unlike Sabina, and not unlike me, perhaps many of you have spent time at the edges until you were drawn more fully toward the song, toward the story, or in this case, toward the community.

Even so, I suspect for all of us the questions remain: can I trust this place? Can I trust these people? Do I belong here, and will I be accepted for who I am? Maybe more deeply still, the question is, will I find God here, and will I experience something like the holy, or is this just another organization with its own needs to fill?

In the Gospel of John we find a dynamic not unlike what I've been describing. There are those who linger on the outside, unsure of their place in the movement that's been building around Jesus. I've selected two instances this morning where that seems to be true, stories that seem to bookend the Gospel. The first occurs in the opening chapter of John, when some people in Galilee get excited about this new teacher, Jesus. It's a time of military occupation. It's a time of widespread impoverishment. It's a time of political ferment, as people wish for a revolt against Rome. There are a lot of voices competing for attention. And so when Nathaniel is told about Jesus, he remains skeptical. He stands on the outside, not unlike me at certain times of my life. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathaniel asks.

That may tell us something about Nazareth in those days, but I think it tells us far more about Nathaniel himself. He sounds like a person who has been disappointed one too many times. He sounds like someone who doesn't want to risk being disappointed again. He sounds like someone who is a very reluctant joiner. "Come and see," is the invitation that he receives by way of response. "There's something good here, something worthy of your attention and time." And so he does go and see, and what captures him seems to be the fact that Jesus somehow sees *him*, and knows *him* for who he truly is. Beneath his reluctance, beneath his disappointment, was a deeper desire, something that hungered for trust, for acknowledgment, and for belonging. It's as though all he ever wanted, to quote Joni Mitchell, was to come in from the cold.

The story of Nathaniel is one of the opening stories of the Gospel of John. But the book closes with a similar tale involving a reluctant and perhaps disappointed friend of Jesus, who is also invited to "come and see." I'm referring, of course, to Thomas, patron saint of all of us who are skeptics or reluctant joiners. After the resurrection, the other disciples have each had experiences that convince them of the reality of the risen Christ. Thomas, however, stands apart, like a child at the edge of a song or story circle. "Unless I can see him with my own eyes and touch him with my own hands, I will not believe it," Thomas says. Perhaps he feels he has been duped one too many times. Perhaps he feels disdain for the credulity that so many people have for superstitions or the supernatural. Whatever his reasons, Thomas too stands apart.

But once again, we find that Jesus acknowledges Thomas's individuality. Jesus finds a way to answer Thomas's need, helping him to move from the edge toward the fullness of belonging that he secretly seems to desire. But there's something curious about the text: Thomas

makes known his request to see and to touch Jesus's wounds. Jesus later appears and invites Thomas to see and to touch. Thomas then responds with a confession. But I want you to notice something: nowhere does the text ever say that Thomas actually placed his hands in Jesus's wounds. Between the invitation and Thomas's response, we might expect an additional line: "And so Thomas reached out his hand and touched the wounds," or something like that. But it's not there. It's as though what Thomas really wanted wasn't some kind of proof, but just an acknowledgement of his own journey, and of his own need. It wasn't, in other words, empirical data that Thomas required, so much as Jesus seeing him in his own individuality. I get you, is what Jesus seems to be saying, and you belong, with all of your idiosyncrasies, with all of your individual needs. Here too, it is as though all Thomas ever wanted was to come in from the cold of his own solitude. "My Lord and my God," Thomas says.

So look, it's hard to trust much of anything these days. So many of our institutions have proven to be disappointing, and sometimes flagrantly so. So many have demonstrated just how exclusionary they can be: the church, the Constitution, the courts, universities and schools, our towns, even our conceptions of God. I wonder if that trust can ever be restored, and if it's still possible to say to one another, "Come and see - here is something good that is worthy of your trust, something or Someone that is worthy of your time and attention." I wonder if it's still possible to say, "Here is something that seeks to include rather than to push out what does not belong. Here is something where your deepest instincts, your fullest individuality, is valued for what it is. Here is a place where you are known and responded to. Here is a place where your sanity can be restored. Here is a place where you can breathe, where you can relax your being just a little, where you can feel free." Is it still possible to say and imagine such things?

That is what I wish to say and imagine about FCCOL - that it is a place of belonging, a place of acceptance, where your deepest individuality can be nurtured. It can be so precisely because that is what God has done for us. God seeks us out wherever we might be, including standing around the edge of things, trapped in a solitude of our own devising. As with Nathaniel and Thomas, we can trust that God, in the guise of Jesus, or perhaps in a guise particular to each and every one of us, comes to meet us, speaking our name, meeting our needs, in order to say, "I love you, and you belong." It is God who does that first for us, and it is, thereafter, we who do it for one another.

Speaking personally now, I will say that little by little across the years, I have discovered that there is something trustworthy about the tradition to which we belong. I have discovered that there is something trustworthy and reliable about God, and about Jesus, who reveals something of what God might be like to us. And I have discovered that the church - this church - is something worthy of my commitment. I hope, we hope, that the same will be true for each of you who have expressed your belonging this morning. And we hope that it will be true for all of us who gather here on a weekly basis.

I'll end where I began - with Joni Mitchell's beautiful and moving song, "Come In From the Cold." It gives expression to a desire for belonging and intimacy that I believe we all feel, perhaps more acutely than ever. Loneliness is now a social epidemic, and it seems like we've all become reluctant skeptics hovering about the edge of things. I can't promise that a church, or a community, or even that faith itself, will deliver you from every last twinge of isolation or hopelessness. But I do pledge that we will do everything within our power to be a place that you can trust, and a place where you can experience the love of God in the fullness of your own being, of your own individuality. Because I have a hunch, that deep down, for most of us, all we ever wanted was to come in from the cold.