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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Mark 16: 14-15, 19-20; Titus 1: 15; John 14: 2
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Everything Else in the House of God

“In my Father’s house, there are many mansions.”

-John 14: 2

The weeks after Easter present a preacher with a mere handful of stories about Jesus from which to choose. There is the Emmaus Road story, and there is the one about Thomas being invited to place his hand in the wounds of the risen Christ. There is the meal on the shores of Galilee and there is Peter’s restoration. And then there is the Ascension of Jesus, where he gives a brief set of instructions to his disciples before rising into the heavens. “Go into all the world,” Jesus says immediately before he goes away. “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news.” Or in some translations, “Go into all the world and make disciples.”

We don’t follow the lectionary very strictly around here, and so you’ll forgive me if I jump ahead to these particular words of Jesus prior to the accustomed time, which tends to be on something called Ascension Sunday, seldom if ever celebrated here. I do so because we are planning to welcome new friends into our community not long from now, and in the lead up to that, I thought it would be helpful to share a little about what it means to be a Congregationalist, and how FCCOL fits into that theological stream. Not only that, Laura and a group of adult mentors are guiding some of our young people through Confirmation right now, helping them to understand a little more about the form of faith that we practice around here. And there are few better ways to talk about who we are than to concentrate upon those final words of Jesus: “Go into all the world.”

Before diving in, let me say that I’m well aware that very few people these days spend much time discussing the differences between Christian denominations. I’m also aware, from long experience, that such things don’t exactly make for the most scintillating topics of conversation at cocktail or dinner parties. But say you’re confronted with the reaction that I received a few weeks ago when I shared what church it was that I was the minister of. “Oh, *that* church,” my interlocutor said. Yeah, this church. There are reasons we do things the way we do, and it’s worth taking time to understand who we are from time to time.

So let’s spend a little time exploring that wonderful little phrase Jesus utters just prior to the Ascension. But let’s notice first of all what he does not say in that transitional scene at the end of his earthly ministry. He does not say, “Now that I’m departing, I want you to start a new

religion.” Again, he does not say “Your job, in my absence, is to create a bunch of new doctrines explaining who I am.” He does not say that you are to make up catechisms and then force children to memorize them. He doesn’t tell them to erect beautiful buildings with tall steeples. I’m sorry to tell you that he doesn’t even tell them to form Boards and Committees and to print bulletins every week. He tells them simply to go into all the world.

But then notice one more thing he doesn’t say. Jesus does not say, “Spread yourself across the surface of the earth in order to ensure that everyone believes the exact same things.” Sadly, that’s how many Christians have carried out Jesus’s final teaching - with swords and later with guns on one hand, and through missionary societies on the other, an attempt to turn the world into a single, flat, dull Christian monoculture. It’s true that some earlier generations of Congregationalists heard Jesus’s words in precisely that way, as they set forth building their new Jerusalems here on North American soil. By and large, though, Congregationalists have come to understand those words of Jesus very differently, opening toward both a worldly theology, and a theology of the world. Indeed, we believe that Jesus’s words open toward a love of the world.

To understand the theology of the world that Jesus’s phrase points toward, it helps to have an image, an extended metaphor. Here, I want to return to another evocative phrase that Jesus uttered, the one with which I began: “In my Father’s house there are many mansions,” he told his disciples. I don’t know about you, but I think for many people, when they imagine the life of faith - here’s the extended metaphor - they imagine being invited into something like a large and rambling house - a mansion, really - whose exact dimensions are unclear. Rooms spill into other rooms, and you can go on exploring the contours of this House of Faith for years, if not an entire lifetime. To take up residence within that sprawling House of Faith is, I suspect, what many people implicitly imagine when they think of what it means to become a disciple of Christ, or to practice the Christian faith.

I want to linger with this metaphor of the House of Faith. There is within it a room within the house devoted to the study of the Bible. For many people of faith, especially for conservative Protestants, that is the most important room of all. In truth, there are doors adjoining that room that open to what seem to be an infinite variety of corridors and specialized rooms devoted to the study of individual books and chapters of the Bible. In truth, many who enter the rooms marked for the Bible never feel a need to go anywhere else.

There is also a room dedicated to theology, but it too has many corridors and smaller rooms that spill off from the main space - rooms dedicated to the mystics and the moderns and the medievals. This part of the mansion is a labyrinth, even larger than that dedicated to the Bible. Sometimes, those who wander those corridors get lost, and are never heard from again.

In this spacious mansion, there is a whole wing dedicated to prayer and spirituality. That room too is vast, and it seems to attract a different type of person - one who wishes to engage less in study than in an exploration into the experience of God. Here too there are additional

rooms and corridors to visit, and there are those who take up permanent residence within these rooms.

Moving even farther into the mansion, one encounters a wing dedicated to music, and still others dedicated to different artistic expressions - visual art, film, literature. In the music wing, people absorb themselves in the study of sacred sound, beginning with chant and choral polyphony. Some get immersed in Bach and Haydn and Handel; others get excited about hymnody, and still others find a room given over to praise music, and other Christian pop. So too, in certain adjacent corridors there are rooms dedicated to the study of Michaelangelo and Caravaggio, of Dante and of Milton, and of more contemporary figures like Tolkien.

Wander into other parts of the mansion and you can find rooms dedicated to the preparation of food, to the study of the lives of saints and the history of social movements born of faith. You can find whole wings of the mansion where people construct an endless array of liturgies and rituals - they never tire of devising new ones - and you can find wings devoted to learning how to care for others. The mansion, the House of Faith, is truly endless, filled with many, many rooms.

I have to tell you, I spent much of my life wandering those rooms, and I was happy to do so. I was shown just a few as a child and adolescent, and then during my early adult years I discovered just how vast the mansion was. For the most part, I was happy there. All the rooms were clearly marked, and I soon found staircases that led up, and sometimes down, into all the adjoining areas where I discovered new things in the House of Faith.

But one day I discovered a door that wasn't marked in quite the same way. In fact, there were no markings upon it whatsoever. I pulled at the door to open it, as I had done on all the others, and it wouldn't budge. I tried once again, but this time I pushed. And all of a sudden the door swung outward. Instead of another room, I found myself looking at the sky, at fields and trees, and at the sea. And I saw people...lots and lots of people. It was a whole vast outside that I had scarcely remembered or even known. When I turned to inspect the door again, I noticed an inscription I hadn't seen earlier. It read: Everything Else in the House of God. I hovered at the threshold for a long time, nervous to abandon the structure, the vast House of Faith that I had known for so long. But then I walked through the door, and I have kept on walking.

Congregationalists are those who have found that doorway, the one marked "Everything Else in the House of God." Not everywhere and not always, but by and large Congregationalists are those who have chosen to walk across that threshold. It's not that we have permanently left behind the House of Faith and its many rooms. It still forms a kind of habitation, and we continue to find places within it to call our own. We return to this House for rest, for sustenance, and for care. But as often as not, we Congregationalists push toward the Everything Else, understanding that there is no domain in which some trace of the Sacred, some whisper of the Divine, cannot be found: in other faith traditions, in different cultural expressions, in the realm

known as the political, in the sciences, in the arts, in the natural world - there is nothing, in other words, that can separate us from God.

That's the kind of understanding and practice that drew me to FCCOL some thirteen years ago. Here was a place filled with people who took up residence in the House of Faith, but who were not confined to it. Here was a place for those who had walked through that open door toward the Everything Else, and who had consequently learned to pray with Lakota elders, who knew what it was to touch their foreheads to the earth with Muslims, who understood that God was more likely to be found in the streets where celebrations happen and in the struggles where heartbreaks occur. Here was a place that understood the value of accompaniment - the realization that sometimes we are called not to fix things (for some things cannot be fixed) but simply to accompany one another through the pain and bewilderment of life. Here were those who had learned what it means to be responsive to the needs of the world around us, whether that has to do with food insecurity or job losses or people coping with forms of political persecution. Here was a place willing to venture far beyond the House of Faith - out toward the Boundary Places, as Paul Tillich put it. I fell in love with this place thirteen years ago, and I love it still, because so many of you have understood what it means to venture through the doorway, in order to encounter the Everything Else. You have learned what it is to go into all the world.

Let me chase one more dimension of this movement into the world before I'm through. In the middle of the 20th century, when the planet was wracked by differing forms of fascist and totalitarian control, the philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote about something called *Amor Mundi*, the love of the world. It was a concept that she found in the writings of Saint Augustine, but that she adapted to her own ends. In a letter written in 1955, after having fled Germany, after having lived through the Second World War, after enduring exile in various places, Arendt wrote to a friend, "I've begun so late, really only in recent years, to truly love the world..."¹ And yet she managed that love, writing about it beautifully in her book *The Human Condition*.

Commenting on Arendt and *Amor Mundi*, a writer named Robert Pogue Harrison has said this: "*Mundus* is the world we share in common with our fellow human beings. It is what we enter when we leave our homes in order to enter into the public realm. It's what we worry about when we tune into various news sources and learn about this or that troubling turn of events. *Mundus*, the world, is what holds us all together through our institutions and through our religious and social forms of existence. We love the world for the way it structures our collective lives, connecting us to past and future generations. Without a world, in this sense, we cannot be fully human."² As Shakespeare puts it in *King Lear*, without a world we become little more than unaccommodated man, a poor, bare, forked animal.

¹ Arendt, Hannah, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926-1969* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1992), letter dated August 6, 1955.

² Robert Pogue Harrison, in a monologue on *Amor Mundi* delivered on his podcast "Entitled Opinions," July 28, 2023. <https://entitled-opinions.com/2023/07/28/amor-mundi-robert-harrison-on-world-love/>

Hannah Arendt wrote about *Amor Mundi* in a time not unlike our own, when worlds were literally disappearing - through acts of warfare, through the erosion of neighborly trust, through the loss of a shared commitment to a greater good, to the absence of faith in a future worth having, through institutional collapse on all fronts. Arendt learned to cultivate a love for disappearing worlds. She learned to invest in the ongoing sustainability of the world. So too must we.

When Jesus says, “Go into all the world,” I believe he is inviting us into the Everything Else. But I also believe he is inviting us into a form of *Amor Mundi*. To be a disciple, in this sense, to proclaim the good news, is to be a lover - of people most of all, but also of the many traditions that make up and bind the human community. It is to be a lover of the natural world, upon which we depend in order to live. To be a disciple is to be a lover of all forms of knowledge - to be a passionate student of life itself. To be a disciple, filled with *Amor Mundi*, is to be a lover of justice, ever in pursuit of the good. To be a disciple is to be a lover of practical forms of wisdom - the ability to do and to fix things that we may be of service to one another. To be a disciple is to be a lover of the structures that bind us together, along with the long arc of historical memory that instructs and guides us. To be a disciple is to be a lover of the poets, and their ability to help us all to perceive anew the reality in which we move. To be a disciple is to go out into the world, to walk through the door toward the Everything Else, and to fall in love.

Congregationalists have understood such things for a long time now. So too has FCCOL. Many of us have found our way here for precisely that reason. The doors of this church have ever swung outward, into all the world, where we are invited to become lovers of what God has declared good.

If ever you are faced with the response that I encountered a few weeks back - “Oh, *that* church,” tell your interlocutor about the final words of Jesus. Tell them about the Everything Else, and about *Amor Mundi*. Tell them FCCOL is a place for lovers. And then invite them to come to church. Amen.