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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Book of Samuel II 1:25-27, Matthew 22:37-40

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"Is It Just a Breeze?"

I grew up in a tiny Congregational church in the western hills of Essex, in a village of 900 called Ivoryton.

Within an extended family of more aunts and uncles than I could count, we not only knew each others' business we were always in each others' business.

The church was a central part of the community and of our lives, but not in an outwardly theological or religious sense.

We weren't pressured or told to accept any doctrine, the rituals were minimal, the main events were the regular potlucks, Friday night dances, holiday picnics, and fairs.

One time I came home from Sunday school and asked my mother a few questions about Jesus along the lines of "Was he God?"

She said with a calm, convincing demeanor that he "was just a man."

It wasn't a put down, a dismissal, or a negation of Jesus.

Her response was a way to give me my own familiarity with him — and I went away thinking that Jesus was a lot like one of my older cousins — bigger, better looking, smarter than I was, someone one who liked me and stood up for me when I got into trouble.

Another time, after a scary conversation with my friends, I asked my Sunday School teacher about heaven and hell. She was quick to say that both were here on earth and it was up to us to make it one or the other. I was quick to feel relieved that I didn't have to worry about getting sent to a dark, hot dungeon after I died.

While we weren't required to obey a strict set of teachings, there was a guiding principle that gave organization and meaning to our lives.

It wasn't raised up and worshipped — or singled out and proclaimed as that which united us, gave us common ground and hope.

It simply permeated our interactions with each other.

No advice throughout my childhood was more often and casually applied to my behavior than this guiding principle, which was the commandment to love my neighbor as I would love myself, and it was more commonly expressed as treat others as you want to be treated.

As a child moving into my teens I didn't believe in God, didn't pray to God, but went along with what the others did, because that's what most kids did.

Through college and into adulthood not much changed, but after coming out and while living in San Francisco, I knew that I wanted to become a clergyman.

I couldn't say then and can't say now how I knew. It wasn't because of a call from God. And there was no fantasy about becoming holy, sanctified, or called a reverend.

In looking back on my life in San Francisco in the seventies, I realize that among the joy and relief of coming out there was another reality. There was Anita Bryant's crusade against gay people, there was the assassination of Harvey Milk, and there was an increasing frequency and degree of anti-gay violence as our neighborhoods and presence became more visible, with episodes of gay-bashing, mutilation, and killing that exceeded anything I could have imagined.

I wanted and needed to be part of changing that — and so I turned to the one resource from my upbringing, the foundation and basis of what I believed, my faith — that as we treat others we will be treated.

I did know that coming Back East in the seventies would not be to a welcoming and affirming church, that my chances of becoming ordained and employed were slim to none, and that a passage in the Bible called for my death.

But as Steve said in his sermon a few months ago, we find cracks, small fissures, in our troubled tradition, through which we can slip and build a greater, brighter, expanding situation of liberation.

For me one of those cracks was this morning's first scripture reading. It may not seem like much. Biblical scholars often see it as a mere literary device in which David can graciously become king as he praises the dead king and his dead son.

But for me, David's recognition that "the weapons of war are perished" and then his expression of loss for his lover, friend, brother were enough of a foothold on which to start building a theology and ministry of peace and love.

Around that time, a lesbian theologian Carter Heyward was developing a theology of mutuality, in which she challenged the traditional vertical top-down image of a demanding and almighty God and proposed instead a more horizontal relationship — a give-and-take, mutual, collaborative relationship in which we are partners and co-creators with God.

The Jewish theologian Martin Buber had taken this mutual relationship with God a step further to suggest that God is not simply the one who offers and bestows mutuality but is mutuality itself. Martin recognized God as a creative force between and among humans that makes our relationships equal, reciprocal, and ultimately meaningful.

Both Carter and Martin were speaking of relationships as sharing and possibility rather than as control and order — relationships that are shaped by “power with” another rather than by “power over” another.

Their work appealed to me as I began my position as a chaplain at Wesleyan — both in the way I related to students and the ministry I developed with and for them.

When I started at Wesleyan, I inherited a traditional Sunday morning Protestant worship service that 5 to 6 students would attend, if I was lucky.

It took all of three minutes to realize that college students don’t get up early on Sunday morning for anything, let alone a worship service.

So, I set myself the task of designing and offering a unique weekly spiritual gathering that would interest and attract students.

By listening to students and visiting their social activities I saw and heard their need for a time of reflection, quiet, and rest — to sing cheesy, corny songs — to express without apology sentimentality — to escape however briefly the academic demands to live in their heads without healthy attention to their body and feelings.

I offered my weekly service on Wednesday at dinner time. In the middle of the week they needed a break — and they always needed food.

The service attracted in equal measure students from any, all, and no religious backgrounds.

We sat on the floor in a large circle — concentric circles as attendance increased — with a flower arrangement in the center.

I designed a different ritual each week that addressed what I saw as a predominant feeling or issue on campus — the ritual could involve poetry, exercises, songs, art, writing — there were no explicit references to particular religions — there were pauses, meditation, contemplation, but nothing that would be called prayer — I would lead off and invite participation as someone in the circle, not above or set apart — to close someone would volunteer to lead a song — a familiar one or a new one they’d teach us — we ended with a simple meal — each person was invited to take a flower from the arrangement when they left.

One may ask where was God in all of this; as one may ask where was God in my tiny childhood church; or as one may, and many have, ask where is God in our Sunday gatherings here. Maybe Jesus can help us answer that.

In our second scripture reading, when the high priest poses the question to test and embarrass Jesus, Jesus’ reply is a bit fresh and show-offy.

He gives two commandments rolled into one instead of the asked-for one greatest commandment. He plays a word game saying these two commandments are different but also

the same. And he reminds the high priest that he forgot to include the Prophets as books that include the greatest commandment.

Jesus clearly one-ups the high priest, has some fun at his expense, and plays to the crowd — the people who have gathered to hear him teach.

That he favors the people is made even clearer when we look at the original Greek of this text. Jesus uses the familiar singular pronoun for "you."

He is not talking to a nation, a tribe, a group, an organized body of people, or the gathered high priests — this is addressed to an individual, a person, to you. And he uses the "you" word repeatedly.

In just four sentences, word-crafted and fine-tuned over centuries beginning in the Law, continuing in the Prophets, and then into the New Testament where Jesus speaks about the greatest commandment with three parts: God, neighbor, self — and specifically YOUR God, YOUR neighbor, and YOURself.

Each part is made equally important to the other. In Jesus' words, the first part (love of God) "is like" the second part (love of neighbor), and that part (love of neighbor) is shaped by and dependent on the third part (how you love yourself).

Neither of these three parts can stand alone — all stand together and need each other — but the movement here is from the end — from how you love yourself — to the beginning — how you love your neighbor and your God, who are alike.

In the third, taking ourselves seriously and honestly, loving ourselves provides us with the basis for empathy and compassion.

When I learn to recognize when I need help, then I can more easily recognize when someone else needs help.

We can understand the pain of others when we understand our own. Which is not to say that we know exactly what others feel — but it provides us with the starting point to make a connection to learn about another's pain.

The same can be said about when we take care of ourselves, minister to our own needs, do what feels right and makes us feel whole — when we do that, we get it when others needs to do the same, but not necessarily in the same way.

Notice, too, that Jesus doesn't say love "the" God or love God, he says love "your" God. He doesn't impose a universal God on us. He insists that you love your God, and you love your neighbor and yourself.

We shouldn't let anyone tell us who or what our God is. Only each of us can know and name what is most important and ultimately meaningful for us. For some that may mean no God at all; for others it may mean many images of God all at once or one after the other.

We may study, learn, and talk about different images and understandings of God, but the God we love with all your might should be our own.

My own God visits and talks to me as a soft breeze, persistent but not pushy, straight-talking but not scolding, concerned but not calculating. She often asks me for my advice — sometimes that's intimidating, other times I can't shut up.

At first I was tempted to think of her as just a little breeze as my mother had referred to Jesus as just a man.

But Jesus does deliver. If anyone is ever looking for a document titled, the Declaration of Religious Freedom, there is none better than what he says about the greatest commandment.

And my breeze has not blown away.

She almost always tells me to "do less" because I usually try to do too much; and she tells me to take better care of myself, because each of us is her gift to the world.

The answer to the question, "Where is God in all of this?", is "with you;" you're the final authority.