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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: John 14: 1-4; Philippians 2: 3-7

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“Many Mansions”

Every year at this time we’re presented with the dilemma of how to merge our lives and stories once again. We’ve heard from a variety of different voices throughout the summer, which has been a gift for us all. Some of us have traveled, or have taken some time away, while others of us have poured energy into the White Elephant Sale, or our immigration ministry. Things have happened to you. Things have happened for me, and for all of us as ministers. And so where do we begin? How do we get caught up?

For my part, the first thing to say is that I’ve missed you! I was around a little more this summer, but I did take a little time away with family toward the end of July. Augie and I went to Colorado for a backpacking adventure, and then our wider family gathered in Pennsylvania for a visit. I was glad for the time away, and glad to explore some different places. But it also reinforces how good it is to return to New England, to Connecticut, and ultimately to you.

And then ten of us associated with FCCOL flew to Brazil, to explore the religion, music and culture of the city of Salvador, and its surrounding region. We traveled with about ten or twelve other people from around the country, in a group called Postmambo, organized and led by our friend Ned Sublette. Many of those travelers had no idea what kind of community FCCOL was, and some of them, I learned, were a little skeptical that they would be blending with a church group. Who can blame them? I would be wary too. But from all I could see and from all that I heard, that skepticism fell away once everyone got to know our group, and began to understand the unique spirituality and theology that animates this place. Once again, it made me proud of this community, and grateful to be able to share in the work of what it is to be and to represent FCCOL.

I want to share just a little about Brazil this morning. But to get there, I’d like to refer to a book written some thirty years ago now, by Harvey Cox. Harvey was a professor at Harvard Divinity School, and he is one of my theological heroes. We even hosted him here at FCCOL about ten years ago - he has preached from this pulpit. The book I have in mind is called *Many Mansions*, and it’s a kind of spiritual adventure story, where Harvey chronicles his encounters with various religious and non-religious traditions - Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and secular materialism. He takes as his starting point the gospel passage from which he borrowed his title, and that we just heard, where Jesus says, “In my father’s house there are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you.” There are, Jesus hints, many pathways into the realm of the sacred, many ways of construing the divine.

Harvey expands on that passage by noting that every tradition is composed of both the particular and the universal. There are the specific elements of a religious tradition that emerged at a given time and place, like Jesus healing and teaching in the years 1-33 AD, or the Prophet Mohammed receiving revelations from Allah in the desert of Saudi Arabia 600 years later. The history clad elements, the particular, are like the center of a wheel, but traditions also have spokes leading to an outer radius, which is the universal - those places where our traditions converge, and where the unity of the human family is affirmed beyond our particularities. According to Harvey, we need both the particular and the universal if we are to be faithful to the entirety of our faith tradition.

For example, we need particularity to remind us of difference as a positive value - we don't want to dissolve the rich tapestry of faiths and cultures around the world into a bland soup of sameness. The details of our origins, and of our practices, do indeed vary greatly, and we have license to embrace the particularities of our own tradition, as do others. That's why I'm a little reluctant whenever people say of different religious expressions, "Oh, when you break it all down, they're really all just the same." Sort of. But there are unique features of each of our traditions that we can and should recognize, precisely so that we can honor and uphold difference as a positive good. I, for one, do not wish to live in a world where everything is reduced to the same.

But then, according to Harvey, we also need universality if we are not to fall into sectarianism or fundamentalism. We need to find the places within not only our traditions, but also our own hearts, that connect us to different cultural and spiritual practices. And all faith traditions have those openings. In Hinduism, Brahman embraces all times, every aspect of existence, and every individual savior. In Islam, the Koran reveals a God who invites all humans to share in the unity that is God. In Buddhism, the bodhisattva refuses to enter nirvana until every living creature can enter with him. And in the risen Christ, all human beings are summoned into an inclusive community of service and praise.¹ Now more than ever, in this era of rising fundamentalisms, nationalisms, and demagogic leaders, when various particulars have hardened into rigid orthodoxies, we need to cultivate the imagination of the universal.

I've learned much from Harvey Cox's work over the years, and I love the foundation he laid in *Many Mansions*. But while Europe, the Middle East, and Asia are represented in his chronicle, Africa is nowhere on the map. That's a reflection of the time in which the book was written, but it's also a reflection of longstanding assumptions about African spiritualities that still need to be overcome - that they are primitive or crude, say, or that they lack the refinement of the so-called "major" traditions. Those stereotypes have been challenged in the academy by now - at

¹ Cox, Harvey, *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pgs. 2-3.

least in some quarters - but even churches used to pushing out toward the universal have struggled to affirm the African traditions. That has to do with a long history of racism and colonialism in our histories, but it also has to do with the very structure of Protestantism. Indeed, it is Protestants that have been most reluctant about the African traditions. Quite often, as we shall see, Protestants have been at the forefront of persecuting such religious expressions.

And so if I were to offer an update to Harvey's book, it would be a journey through the various African diasporic traditions as they've been expressed throughout the Western hemisphere, but also in Africa itself. In an increasingly racist, xenophobic, and dogmatic age, I believe this is one of the growing edges that people of faith of all backgrounds need to be pursuing, for the sake of healing, and affirming one another's humanity.

That is, essentially, what we've been doing for the past six or seven years here at FCCOL, but really for the last decade. In our travels, we've been creating a cognitive and spiritual map of an interrelated set of practices that are major world traditions, together with the cultural life those traditions have nurtured - in the U.S. South, but especially in New Orleans; in Cuba; in Haiti; in Ghana, and Togo and Benin; and now in Brazil.

Let me offer just a little more background on what makes Brazil unique. During the transatlantic slave trade, approximately 390,000 captive Africans were brought to the shores of what are now the United States. A good many wound up in New England, including here in Old Lyme. By contrast, historians estimate that some 5.5 million kidnapped Africans were delivered to the shores of Brazil, an order of magnitude greater than anywhere else in the hemisphere. And the place that many of those captives were taken was Salvador, which today is the Blackest city in the western hemisphere. Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery, in 1888, two years after Cuba, but unlike the United States, there was never an official policy of racial apartheid in the years that followed. What that means is that Salvador became a kind of protective enclave for the celebration of Afro-Brazilian spirituality and culture, where those traditions have been given oxygen, or at least more oxygen than in some other places. And so they've flourished. There is a spirit of welcome, a spirit of openness and hospitality in Salvador that stems from living within a protective shelter. That's not to say there isn't racism - there is. Brazil has problems that run deep right now, problems that parallel those that we have here in the U.S. It's simply to say that Salvador has a unique and a very special vibe about it - it's cosmopolitan, it's tolerant, it's hospitable, it's alive with creativity...but above all, it's humane.

Our journey was constructed as a travel seminar, and we had our minds blown several times a day, which is to say, every few hours. We visited many sacred temples, called *terreiros*, where Candomblé ceremonies are held. Candomblé is the most prominent form of African spirituality in Brazil, akin to what in Cuba is called Lukumi or Santería, and what in Haiti is called Vodou. And we conversed with their spiritual leaders. Wherever we went, if given the opportunity, I said that we were a part of a faith community, a church. And frequently, I was greeted with astonishment, for as I mentioned, Protestant churches have not been receptive to

these traditions. In fact, Protestants have attacked and persecuted the *terreiros* and their members. It sounds crazy (though less and less so given what we're seeing here in the United States) but groups of armed evangelicals carrying machine guns have shown up at *terreiros* throughout Brazil, telling them, in the name of Jesus, that their form of worship is no longer welcome in the area. It's a problem, even in Salvador.

One of our visits was to a *terreiro* run by a lovely and wise woman named Mae Diana. I would love for all of you to meet her one day. Hers is a sprawling, female-led terreiro in the Candomblé tradition, governed by the spirit Oxun, the goddess of love. Dressed in a magnificent yellow wrap, Mae Diana showed us the various altar spaces for the veneration of other spiritual ancestors, and then she led us to a sacred tree, where we were each invited to offer prayers. She spoke of the healing properties of the earth, and she showed us a fallow garden, one that she hopes might be cultivated for the growing of herbal medicines, sacred to her tradition. It was a peaceful and a gorgeous space, and I began to imagine visitors from FCCOL staying there, learning from Mae Diana, and helping to cultivate her garden. Who can say what the future holds?

But I also noticed some graffiti on one of the garden walls. In a large and ugly green script, someone had spraypainted *Jesus Salve* - Jesus Saves - across the wall. Later, I asked about the graffiti. "Was it evangelical vandals who spraypainted that," I asked? "Absolutely," came the response. "You cannot underestimate how aggressive they can be." I responded: "Whoever that Jesus is, it's not the Jesus I know." To which our interpreter replied, "That's right. Because Jesus didn't persecute people."

That ugly piece of graffiti stands as a testimony to those who have gotten lost within the particulars of a tradition, and who cannot see anything beyond it. By contrast, FCCOL is the kind of place that has learned how to stand within the particular, while allowing the particular to open toward the universal, where our humanity is joined to the humanity of others. Everyone we visited seemed to sense that about us, and we were shown extraordinary hospitality as a result.

I'll leave you with one final thought. In the book of Philippians, we find the remnants of what is thought to be an ancient hymn sung about Jesus. It is believed to be the oldest part of the New Testament, pre-dating the Gospels and the letters of Paul. We heard the words earlier, but here they are again: "Christ, though in the image of God, didn't deem equality with God something to be clung to - but instead became completely empty, and took on the image of oppressed humankind: born into the human condition, found in the likeness of a human being."

To read that passage according to the particular alone would be to affirm it literally - that in Christ Jesus, God took on human flesh. Done. That's all well and good. But to extend it toward the radius, to read it as opening toward the universal, would be to affirm that the Divine, the Sacred, God, comes to us in the form by which we each can receive Him or Her or Them. That means that in different cultural geographies and times, and sometimes even among those who sit next to one another in the same pew, the Sacred and the Holy may become manifest in

different ways. God seeks us out in the language and cultural form in which we are enabled to perceive God.

What I'm not suggesting is that behind all the various traditions of the world, it's actually Jesus or the Christian God calling the shots. What I do not believe is that everyone is just a secret Christian. What I am saying is that whatever aspect of reality we have encountered in Jesus or God is a part of the same ultimate reality that Afro-Brazilian practitioners of Candomblé have encountered in their practice, to say nothing of all the other traditions of the world.

"In my father's house, there are many mansions," Jesus said. We at FCCOL have made it our practice to visit many of those mansions, helping us to imagine just how vast this World-House actually is. It is so much broader and so much bigger than our own lives, or our own tradition alone. The good, the joyous news, is that there is room for us all in God's World-House - in Old Lyme, in Salvador, everywhere.