

Rev. Dr. Steven Jungkeit
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Isaiah 40: 28-31; Philippians 1: 3-4
 September 27, 2026

Need Someone in the By and By

More than a few of you, I'm guessing, have seen *The Pitt*, the medical drama about the Emergency Room of a Pittsburgh hospital. *The Pitt* was the darling of the Emmy Awards a few weeks ago, and I was glad to see it celebrated. It's one of the most humane and thoughtful shows on television. It's also, in a quiet way, one of the most religious shows on television. There's nothing ostentatious about it - it's just that religion is a part of what patients and doctors alike bring to the ER. Often, it's for the better. It's no accident, after all, that the chief physician has the last name Rabinovitch, and that he goes by the name Dr. Robby, a subtle play on the title "rabbi," which of course means, teacher. More than anything, I've come to think that much of the show is a kind of teaching - helping a beleaguered viewing public to feel again, and to regain our capacities for empathy.

In one episode, a loveable man with a chronic liver condition brought on by years of alcohol abuse perishes suddenly. He had been a "frequent flier," in the ER, and so his death sends ripples of sadness through the staff. After his death, those who had treated him over the years gather for a short viewing, to pay their respects. A few tell stories of their encounters with him, and one nurse holds his lifeless hand. It's a moment of gentle dignity that we can hope is reflective of actual scenes in actual hospitals.

And then the credits roll. As they do, a beautiful song from a musician named Andrew Bird plays. It captured not only a poignant hospital scene; it also captured something of what it is that we do, as people of faith. The words are these:

Can you see him tired and shivering?
 He's stumblin' through the day
 Can you see his lips are quiverin'
 Like he's forgotten how to pray?
 Can you see the way is perilous?
 She's absorbing all the blows
 And who will now take care of us
 In the hills and valleys, the highs and lows?
 All I know is you need someone
 In the by and by...

It's the final question, and the response, that gets me: Who will take care of us in the hills and valleys, the highs and lows? All I know is you need someone in the by and by. Maybe it's the sweet by and by in which we'll need someone, or maybe it's just somewhere off in the future that the need will arise. Or maybe it's right now. But sooner or later, we all need someone.

That's a reality that becomes apparent in hospitals and churches alike. Both are tasked with carrying forth a vision of healing and wholeness in a time of declining resources and social atomization, a time of loneliness and distrust. Both are tasked with seeking out the human core, that place in which a person is worthy of care no matter what baggage they might carry. Both are

tasked with treating the wounds of everyday life. Hospitals treat the body, while we in churches treat slightly more intangible realities - the need for community and friendship; the need to be connected to something transcendent, something beyond ourselves alone; the need to find places of belonging for our families; the need for a tradition capable of speaking into our deepest human moments - from birth to death; the need to feel, and to know, that we are not alone.

On past Stewardship Sundays, I've shared with you some of the reasons I've loved this church, as well as a few others I've known over the years. This time around, I'd like to say just a little about why I've chosen this work in the first place, and why it matters to me as much as it does. I do so with the conviction that in our tradition, we are all called to be ministers, and so I hope something of what I say might speak to your own sense of vocation in this place. But I also do so as a way of addressing a question someone put to me not long ago in an email. The question was this: "Steve, you seem like a reasonably bright person. Why on earth would you have chosen to be a minister?" My answer, in essence, brings me back to Andrew Bird's song. "Who will take care of us in the hills and valleys, the highs and lows? All I know is you need someone in the by and by."

Most of you know by now that I grew up in an evangelical environment. For a long time, that meant existing within a thought-world that was almost entirely tailor made for young evangelicals like me - music, books, youth groups, summer camps, conferences. I even went to an evangelical college that my great-great grandfather helped to found. None of this was entirely bad. In fact, a lot of it was good. I felt known and loved. I was given a moral compass. Most of all, I felt loved and cared for by an all powerful God, or at any rate, what I took to be God.

But it slowly came to feel confining, almost like that novel and film *Room*, in which a young child grows up knowing only the room in which he and his mother are imprisoned. In truth, it was the God I had known that felt more and more alien to me. I had believed that God loved me, but little about this God felt loving. This was a God of power. A God of might. A God that liked to be in control. A God that meted out punishment. A God that liked hierarchies and chains of command. A God with a heightened sense of masculinity. A God who liked some people while despising others. A God with such a heightened sense of moral purity that only the death of his only Son, Jesus, could restore that purity. Little by little, I began to realize that I didn't really love that God at all. Nor, I suspected, did such a God love me, or anyone else. Not really. And so I walked away.

And yet it seemed to me then, and it seems to me now, that there were other, better, understandings of whatever it is that human beings have named "God." And so I began a kind of quest. I read Dostoevsky. I read Elie Wiesel. I read Simone Weil, and the Holocaust diaries of a woman named Etty Hillesum. And I discovered Shusaku Endo, a Japanese author who wrote of a flesh and blood Jesus who walks alongside of humanity, through life, and through the by and by. In his novel *Deep River*, a book I have never stopped loving, and that I never seem to have on hand because I keep giving it away, this very vulnerable Jesus shows up in the guise of a bumbling but loveable hospital orderly. He appears in a bird that seems somehow to understand and absorb human suffering. Even a tree that bears silent witness to a person's emotional pain becomes an image of the man of sorrows. Most of all, though, Jesus shows up in the guise of a failed seminarian who helps ailing Hindu pilgrims get to the Ganges River. He bears their grief. He carries their sorrow. It may be the book that has had the most profound influence upon my spiritual life.

Endo's book helped me to sense some things in the Gospels that I had missed before, things that many in the Christian tradition have missed as well. Most people form ideas of what

God must be like by creating a projection of everything humans are not. We encounter ourselves as weak - inhabiting bodies that can be damaged, and so we imagine that a God must therefore be all-powerful. We experience ourselves as limited in our knowledge, and so we imagine that a God must be all-knowing. We frequently let ourselves and others down, and so we imagine that a God must be morally perfect. Most of all, we are subject to time, and ultimately to death, and so we imagine that a God must be eternal and timeless. And so we imagine a God who is the opposite of what it is to be human. Which is why, sooner or later, that God comes to seem not only unhuman, but inhumane.

With the help of Shusaku Endo and a whole lot of others, I began to sense that perhaps Jesus, the flesh and blood Jesus now, without all the titles and metaphysical attributes later piled onto him, had come to set us free from that human projection. I began to sense that this same flesh and blood Jesus had come to help people to discover a vulnerable love at the very heart of the world. In other words, I began to sense not so much an Overlord deity, but a Someone in the by and by, content to be with human beings in the tender places. I started to feel as if this was a Love that could be trusted. In time, it came to feel as though it was a Love worth building one's life around.

But it was a number of particular church communities that helped me to understand what that looked like in practice. I recall being at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, for example, and learning about the work of pastoral care. One winter, I paid a visit to a man who had received a tough cancer diagnosis. Two days later, we received word that he had died suddenly in his sleep. His wife was beside herself, and so I went to the house, along with another minister, who I was then shadowing. More than anything, I remember marveling at this minister's skill, her way of entering into the sorrow of another in order to calm and to soothe. It was as though she became a human bridge, allowing this woman on the far side of grief, to find her way back to the human community, back to the rest of her family. And I thought, this is what a church is for - to embody a love that enters the sorrows of the world, and that calls us back from the edges, where we are lost and alone. To be a church is to be willing to be that someone in the by and by.

At another church community, I learned for myself what it is to be called back from those edges. It was a joint UCC and Methodist congregation in Northern Vermont, and I had agreed to fill in for their minister while she went on sabbatical. I had just finished a year long chaplain residency at Bridgeport Hospital, and it had been a hard year, spiritually, emotionally, and relationally - for both me and for Rachael. We had two very young children, and there was another on the way. Money had been tight, and we were frazzled and spent, wondering how we were going to get by. Mostly, we went to Vermont as a way to make ends meet. But in doing the ordinary work of ministry, and through the care and love shown to Rachael and to me, and to our two girls, we were called back to each other. It felt joyful and restorative to be in that place. It wasn't dramatic, not on the outside anyway. But inside, the care of this small community stitched us back together, and helped us to know that we could keep going. They became our someone in the by and by.

Building the kind of communities that could do things such as that - becoming a human bridge, being that someone in the by and by, came to feel far more important to me than writing another academic book that no one would read. Amidst all the loneliness and heartache and violence and despair, it came to feel like the most important thing of all. It's why I became a minister, and why I believe in this work as much as I do. It's why I believe in this place, The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme.

It has now been a little more than thirteen years since we arrived here. And I can say that by far, it is this place, and it is all of you, that have taught me the most about what it is to trust that there is a Love at the very heart of the world. I've witnessed how your love shows up - rolls up its sleeves, as our new website says - to provide comfort for those who are grieving. I've witnessed how your love shows up for those seated near to you in the pews, as you've reached out to hold another's hand in a time of sadness or uncertainty. I've witnessed how your love shows up throughout our region, serving meals or pounding nails whenever the need arises. I've witnessed how your love shows up in places like Brazil and Palestine, in Haiti and South Dakota, and many other places too, as you've built bridges of understanding and compassion with those communities. And I have seen how you've shown up for immigrants and for their families. Yours is a love that shows up. You are that someone in the by and by.

Which brings me, at last, to my appeal. Today marks the beginning of our new Stewardship season. 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. Our goal is to see if everyone in this community could give at least a little, and maybe more than a little, to the ongoing work of FCCOL. Speaking for our family, we've pledged \$3,600 to the work of this congregation for the coming year. Some days that feels like a lot to us. We have a kid in college and another who's about to start. Most of the time, that feels like far too little, given our love for this community. Still, it represents the importance that Rachael and I place upon the ministries and mission of The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme.

Ours is a time in which we are having to learn and relearn practices of humanity that keep us connected, that help our families to thrive, and that stand as a bulwark against the rising tide of self-interest, greed, and isolation. As in a hospital emergency room, so in churches, we're asked to show up for one another and for the world. Who will take care of us in the hills and valleys, the highs and lows? We'll do our part. Because we know that we all need someone in the by and by. And here is a place where we can trust that that need will be met.