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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Psalm 40, Acts 16: 23-25
October 4, 2026

The Time of Our Singing

My time is brief this morning. I trust that will come as a relief to you. And so let me jump right in by describing a scene. First, there is a tavern. It is a non-descript, squat building, with only a little neon to identify it. The tavern barely stands out against the darkness of the night. A train whistles in the distance, and a rumbling along the tracks can be heard. Snow is falling. The cold seems ghastly. So does the loneliness of this place, wherever it is. It might be Siberia, but for the fact that we soon hear English being spoken. So Alaska then, or some godforsaken mining town out West. Then again, maybe it's Purgatory. Maybe it's hell.

Inside the tavern a row of forsaken souls huddle against the night, but not together. They are each exquisitely alone. Some mutter to themselves. Some hurl insults, to no one in particular. Some sit in a befogged silence. One man nurses a cigarette, while oxygen tubes run from his nose to a respirator - he has no interest in prolonging his life. A fight breaks out in the corner. A priest is there, still wearing his collar, but he is passed out in a corner booth, and no one pays him any mind, and anyway, religion has no voice here. These are men, we can guess, who have shared this space in an endless repetition of nights, maybe for all eternity, gone there for warmth and maybe for the relief of human company. There is little relief to be found.

A man begs someone for a few dollars, so he can buy another drink. Then he pleads with the bartender to cut him a break, and to pour him something. The bartender is as weary and gruff as the rest of them, and he brushes the man off. Then the bartender seems to surprise even himself. He casts a glance at the ceiling, where people have signed and pinned dollar bills over the years. He tells the drunken faithful that somewhere on the ceiling, in a place known only to him, is a \$100 dollar bill that someone left there. "We're going to have a contest," he says. "Whoever can sing the best song tonight gets to take home that \$100 dollar bill."

So begins an extraordinary 18-minute film called *The Singers*. It's based on a 19th century short story by Ivan Turgenev, set somewhere in Russia. It won the Oscar for best short film this past year. This summer, when Augie and I were out in Colorado, our friends, whose taste in such things is impeccable, insisted that we had to sit down and watch it. Well, ok. We did, and I was astonished. *The Singers* is, unequivocally, the most memorable thing I've seen in a long time.

I won't say a whole lot more, lest I ruin the experience of viewing it. But suffice to say that the lure of \$100 is irresistible. An awkward silence descends, and then one by one, these

hardened, desperate men break into song. Mostly they sing a cappella, until one man opens a long abandoned piano, and reveals his hidden skill. Little by little the isolation of these men drains away, and they wind up demonstrating an incredible vulnerability. I've rarely seen a more tender evocation of love than that displayed in *The Singers*.

So why am I telling you about this film? For starters, it is a pitch perfect fable, a parable really, of masculine vulnerability and pain. It speaks to a reality that I believe many men suffer through, which is the need to present a tough, invulnerable exterior, even as they nurse deep hidden wounds. It's a kind of cultural conditioning that prevents many men from getting in touch with their feelings, or from showing emotion at all, rendering them (us!) as versions of those lost souls at the bar - lonely, volatile, and hurt. In truth, we've been sold a latter day version of stoicism. That's an ancient philosophy which prides itself on building character through suffering, and it's not an accident that stoicism is having a moment just now. If you don't believe me, have a look at the philosophy section of any bookstore, such as it is - books on the stoics are practically a growth industry.

As if on cue, that bottled up and broken form of masculinity was on full display this week as Pete Hegseth spoke to military leaders, extolling the virtues of testosterone and lethal violence. But it was also on display in a very different way in an interview that Sylvester Stallone gave to *The New York Times* last week. His candor was incredibly revealing. In creating two lasting paradigms of a masculine ideal - Rocky and Rambo - Stallone admitted that he did lasting damage to himself by sculpting his body in such a way, and by portraying those two characters on film. He was hopped up on steroids, he said, and starving himself. He was also hiding from an ocean of emotional pain lingering from his own childhood and adolescence.

Meanwhile, those seem to be the very archetypes of U.S. power, and of U.S. masculinity, that are once again circulating in our culture. Stallone openly acknowledged the cost of purveying those images, telling his interviewer, "I live with a heap of regrets." By extension, he hints that the current projections of masculinity and power adopted by many of our leaders are enfeebling projects, built upon illusions, leading toward nothing so much as a mountain of regret. It is as though Stallone had become a singer at the purgatorial tavern, freed to shed the very ideal he had helped to create, demonstrating a vulnerable honesty instead.

And so, *The Singers* demonstrates a different way of being male that seems incredibly welcome just now. In that dark tavern space, men haunted and used up by the kind of masculinity Hegseth and Stallone purveyed try something different. They risk feeling. They risk showing their pain. They risk touch. They risk love.

There is, for me, something about the film reminiscent of the gospel itself, and the process that Peter undergoes in his relationship with Jesus. He begins as a fisherman, and throughout the gospels he seems emotionally detached, often quite clueless in fact. By the end

of the story, he's bathed in his own tears, and we can guess that his own emotional journey is what allows him to actually understand what Jesus is about, which has to do with getting in touch with humanity - one's own humanity, and also that of others. And so the film uncovers a dynamic as old as the gospels, but one that is startling for its contemporaneity.

But *The Singers* also suggests something about what it is to be a church. The tavern and the darkness surrounding it are a stylized portrayal, to be sure, but it's also immediately recognizable as a version of our own reality. For all the material advantages we enjoy, we have succeeded in creating a cold, isolated, and often quite dark form of life that can feel every bit as godforsaken as that midnight tavern. And sometimes, if we're not careful, even going to church can feel a little like that tavern, where we occupy the same space with one another, but remain caught up in our own stuff, and sometimes our own pain, so that we cannot and do not find one another.

That is, perhaps, why we sing in church. Have you ever noticed how often singing takes place in the Bible - especially in the Psalms? "I will sing a new song to the Lord," many of the Psalms begin, as if somehow singing was the pathway out of sorrow, a bridge toward human connection. "You have pulled me out of the pit of destruction," Psalm 40 says. "You have put a new song in my mouth." Throughout the Bible, singing seems to be the way out of isolation, the way to get through the kind of emotional desolation depicted in the film. But then there's this as well: have you ever paid attention to what Paul and Silas do after they're whipped, and then

jailed in the book of Acts? They sing. It's a lesson that Civil Rights protesters learned during the 60's. There are accounts of prison guards at the notorious Parchman Prison Farm in Mississippi being driven nearly out of their minds by the singing of jailed Freedom Riders. To

sing is to be exposed, and therefore a little vulnerable. To sing is to shed the burden of isolation. To sing is to get in touch with a deep well of feeling that lies within us all. To sing with others is to find each other, as if to say, you are not going through this alone.

I like to believe that something like that happens here at FCCOL, when we sing, but at other times too. These days, it can often feel as though we exist in the purgatorial space of that tavern, but I like to think that here, amidst it all, we can at last get in touch with ourselves, and with one another. And I like to think that when we do that, we also get in touch with that reality found in Jesus, a love that he named "God." We come here to find and to practice a new and better way of being human - eating the bread, drinking the cup, and joining our voices in song. For now is the time of our singing.