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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: John 15: 4, 9-11; Romans 8: 22-27
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I Want to Know What Love Is, Part III:
Lessons of Love from Cuba

Those of you who were there know how delightful it was on Friday night to gather and to hear stories told by members of this community at our Moth Potluck. I enjoyed each of the stories, but more than that, I felt like I was encountering dimensions within this community, within some of you, even within my own mother, that I hadn't known before. I walked home on Friday feeling uplifted by the giving and receiving of those stories.

In keeping with that practice, I'd like to tell a story this morning that captures something of what I have learned about love in recent years. If you've been here during the past several weeks, you'll know that I've been exploring the many dimensions of love recently, moving from the romantic love shared between individuals to the kinds of love that Socrates narrates in the *Symposium*. At the end of last week's sermon, I noted how in both Plato and in the life of Jesus, there is a return to the earth as the grounding of our loves. In Plato, musicians burst into the room, forcing returning the participants in the *Symposium* to their bodies. In the Gospels, Jesus stoops to untie the sandals of his friends, washing their feet.

But first some background. One of the great gifts offered to me by the work of FCCOL has been a deepening of my own understanding of religion, but more than that, a broadening of my own imagination of God. I've come to think of religious traditions as being akin to houses, which provide shelter and support for human beings across our lives. It is a good thing to dwell in these houses. But sometimes, we get stuck in our own houses, our own traditions - they're big enough that we never have to leave. And so it becomes good and necessary to step outside of those houses from time to time, in order to comprehend not only how vast and marvelous the world is, but how all of humanity is joined together into one common family. I have come to sense that there is a love at work somewhere within us and among us that binds all of us together - inside and outside of our houses, our traditions.

I must tell you that even though I have a Ph.D. and something like three masters degrees from a very fancy institution of higher learning, and though for a time I held a lectureship at another very fancy institution, I did not learn or absorb that truth - that love - in either of those places. And I must also tell you that even though I went through the ordination process of a major religious body, I did not learn that truth - that love - during that process either. I learned it among you, and through our shared adventures both inside and outside the house of our own faith tradition. There is a love that joins all of humanity together.

Which brings me to my story. It took place just a few years ago, when I went to Cuba to do site visits with some other folks in preparation for a journey that members of our church would be taking a short time later. Churches haven't always mixed well with the traditions of the African diaspora, and it was important to establish a foundation of trust between our two traditions, our two houses, if you will.

What I'd like to share with you this morning is what happened at just one of the rituals we were privileged to attend. It was a ceremony in the Santeria, or Lukumi tradition, which is analogous to candomblé in Brazil and vodou in Haiti. It's a tradition that has been preserved

across the devastation of the middle passage and through the horrors of enslavement, handed down as a healing art across generations, as an instruction in how to love. There are no written Scriptures or texts. Memory is contained and handed down in movements of the body, and in the rhythms of the drum - those are the sacred texts. The ceremony itself is called a bembé, and it involves a whole liturgy. Songs are sung in a precise sequence to honor the various deities of the tradition, called Orishas, and it follows, more or less, a pattern we can recognize - an invocation of the Spirit, or spirits, various songs and prayers offered to those spirits, then ecstatic visions of insight and moral exhortation, and then the sharing of food.

Our team was based in Santiago, on the eastern part of the island, and we wished to visit a rural community called La Guira, even further to the east. It was outside of Guantanamo, which required driving for an hour and a half along deserted Cuban highways. In Guantanamo we stopped at a hotel for coffee, and then we drove another half hour into the countryside, finally arriving at our destination.

Initially, the village of La Guira presented itself as little more than a few buildings along the roadside. Two months later on our return, we were shown deeper into the village, which was nestled within a forest. But on this visit, we parked in front of a covered pavilion just off the road. Outside the pavilion, a fire was going, and there were drums arrayed around it, the heads facing toward the flames. That's how drums are tuned in Cuban Santeria ceremonies - with a flame. It is a poetic image of love if ever there was one - to have our lives tuned by an inner flame that both scorches and refines.

We were shortly invited into the covered area, where we saw before us one of the most spectacular altars I have ever seen. The ritual leader of this community was a magnificent artist. The altar was bursting with color, all of it deeply symbolic, for each spirit within this tradition is associated with a color. Against a vertical backdrop decked out in red for a divinity named Chango, a warrior spirit of thunder, there was a small table draped in white, for another spirit named Obatala, a divinity of wisdom. Three purple balloons were hung just above the table for Babaluaye, a spirit known for the healing of disease, and a large statue of Babaluaye was placed just to the right, as if to watch over the remainder of the altar. On the surfaces of the altar - there was a shelf beneath - images of other members of the divine pantheon were present - Oshun, a female river god, and Elegua, guardian of the crossroads and the opener of doors. Below them was yet another image, Yemaya, spirit of the oceans and waves. But then, extending horizontally upon the floor, out from the table, the ritual leader had placed palm fronds, creating a verdant green floor for Oshosi, a hunter spirit who provides sustenance, upon which offerings of fruit and honey and rum had been arranged.

This is the first image of love I'd like us to see in the bembé: the creation of a scene of transporting beauty, as a gift to the Orishas, but also a means of blessing a community and offering hospitality. You see, love finds a way to create these scenes of beauty from the simple elements of the earth, offering them as gifts.

Here, I wish to relate this to our own ritual practices, here in the Meetinghouse, but also in our homes. When we arrive here each Sunday, the Meetinghouse itself is designed as a place of simple beauty, intended to usher us into a state of being outside of the ordinary. Someone made all of this for us. So too, it's not unlike arriving at somebody's house for a visit, and finding there a table set and a sumptuous meal prepared and waiting. Someone had been expecting our arrival, and they set to work preparing something beautiful for us. Is that not the ordinary goodness of love in our lives?

Shortly, the drums were tuned, and the music began. I've attended a lot of ceremonies by now, but that day in La Guira was some of the most powerful drumming and communal singing that I have ever experienced. There were maybe a hundred people crowded under this pavilion. Most of the community was wearing red for Chango, but a few outliers had on yellow for Oshun. And it was a loud, declarative, open celebration where the whole community showed up to make a joyful sound, their voices rising as one. It went on like that for hours.

And here we can see several different faces of love. It was, first of all, embodied. It was not theoretical, and it was not lodged in books. It required our active participation, our movement, our passion. So too, we entered the pavilion and arranged ourselves around the altar as individuals. But as the drums began and as the voices rang out, we became a communal body, attuned to each other. So we can say on one hand that love sets our bodies in motion, and on the other that it draws us out of our individuality. We become members of one another.

Just the way we do here. True we're not quite as active during services, though sometimes we do manage to let loose. Our motion, our movement, tends to be out in the world, rolling up our sleeves to get things done. Whether in here or out there, love requires communal movement.

With the intensity of the music and the passion of the singers, it didn't take long before the Orishas appeared, incarnated in bodily form. One by one by one, members of the community went into an ecstatic trance, and they manifested the spirits we were honoring: Chango, Ochun, and probably several other Orishas. This was no private ecstasy. It was achieved for the sake of others, for the sake of all of us gathered there in prayer and in praise. Each of those who dropped into a trance, manifesting the spirits, blessed us, their guests, even as they blessed those who lived in the community. Some provided wisdom or advice. Everyone was glad when they arrived.

This may sound strange, but I take it that possession by the spirits is actually another face of love. It takes a different form around here, but we too pray that the Spirit of the living Christ might come and dwell in us. We too say, with the Apostle Paul, that in certain times, it is not we who speak, but the spirit of Christ who speaks through us. We pray these things that we might be more loving and just in the world. To be possessed, in this sense, is to be related to all those ancestors and predecessors of the faith who have come before us. It is to be open to their influence, their guidance, their wisdom. For us, it is primarily Jesus that we invoke, but the book of Hebrews also cites Abraham and Isaac and Jacob as spiritual ancestors, as well as Mary, and Peter, and Paul, and a host of others.

This relates to another of love's many faces. Love requires that we be in relation with the dead, who are not merely dead, but who continue speaking as guides from beyond. I take it that love requires that we open ourselves to the ancestors, our ancestors, from whom we are descended by blood, but also at times by elective affinity. Allowing the dead to speak occurs in many forms: it happens in the pages of books, as past generations reach their hands toward ours. It happens in rhythms of the drum, and in the songs remembered and preserved across continents and through generations of pain and hardship. And it happens through manifestations of spirit, as we allow dead voices to gather and to speak through us. Love is an ancestral practice of ritual and of memory.

Toward the end of the ceremony, our ritual guide, in a state of ecstatic trance, moved outside the pavilion and into a stand of trees. He embraced and blessed the trees, and then he began to climb. Soon, as the drums and singing continued in the pavilion behind us, he tossed

down to the gathered observers pods growing on the tree, the fruit of the earth, more gifts for the gathered community.

And here again we encounter another of love's many faces, as revealed in this extraordinary bembé - for love requires an attunement to the planet, to the earth, as we seek to be in right relation to the ground and the trees, the animals and the elements, of which we are a part.

Returning to the pavilion, the drums finally fell silent, though they continued to ring in our ears. Bowls of soup were shared, along with the sweets that had been arrayed along the palm fronds of the altar. The community had been filled with spiritual rhythms and with wisdom, and the Orishas honored on the altar were now filling us. And so we ate the consecrated food, in order to feed ourselves, but also in order to feed the spirits - or let's just say the divine energies - who were dwelling inside of us. It is exactly what we do here in communion - eating consecrated food, that the Spirit of Christ might dwell inside of us.

Once again love revealed another of its many faces in this generous care of bodies, but also of souls. In Cuba, souls have grown weary from decades of deprivation forced by an inhumane embargo. For my part, I experienced a weariness of soul brought on by the degradation of our public and communal life, and a concomitant weariness from the knowledge of what the policies of my own government have wrought in Cuba, but in so many other places too. There in a pavilion in La Guira, in the Guantanamo Province of Cuba, our souls were fed, and housed, and held by a spiritual community that has retained and adapted traditions across centuries of dehumanization. But rarely have I seen the human spirit more dignified and alive than in La Guira. Love knows how to care for the soul.

When it was over, and we were in the car on our way back to Guantanamo, one of the people helping to organize the journey turned to me and asked what I had thought of the ceremony. I was still in a state of transport, and the best I could say to her was: This is my Jerusalem. This is my Mecca. When I pray, I wish to face not east, but south, toward Cuba, toward Haiti, toward La Guira and Havana and Port-au-Prince, for these are places that have helped to open my sense of the sacred and the holy. These are places that have helped to reveal what love is: hospitality to strangers, the fashioning of astonishing beauty, the communal movement of bodies singing in joy, the ecstatic possession from ancestral spirits who guide, the attunement to the earth itself, with all of it set forth by a complex set of rhythms that get us moving.

But look around this room. This too is my Jerusalem. This too is my Mecca. Or more precisely, it is my, it is our, Havana, Port-au-Prince, New Orleans, Santiago, Salvador, sacred cities all that many of us have visited together. At FCCOL, we have become a portable altar in the world, and wherever we happen to be, whether here or elsewhere, we practice a form of love together that I believe our world desperately needs right now. Our love is joyful. Our love is communal. Our love is pluralistic. Our love is ancient. Our love is modern. Our love is healing. And our love sets our bodies in motion. We are all a part of this mobile, transportable altar. In fact, we are the altar, right here, right now. You are my Jerusalem. You are my Mecca. You are my Havana, my New Orleans, my Salvador. We are that for each other.

Love has many faces, and it takes many forms. Amidst an inferno of inhumanity, communities such as those in La Guira have found ways to build a paradiso, which enables them to go on loving one another, and the strangers they sometimes welcome. If they can do it, so can we. May we be among those who honor such a profound witness. May we be those who carry forth that love for humanity in all that we do, inside and outside this house of faith.