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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Hebrews 12: 1; Philippians 4: 10-13
 May 17, 2020

Distant Land: A Guest, a Challenge, and a Sacrament, or,
 You Gotta Move!

“You gotta move...when the Lord gets ready, you gotta to move.”

*-The Rolling Stones,
 from a traditional blues by Mississippi Fred McDowell*

Most of the time the Meetinghouse sits here empty. Even under normal conditions, it's used, at most, for several hours every week. But these days, there's a spectral quality to its emptiness. We've talked about that before, and you've seen it in the videos we've made. Except the Meetinghouse hasn't exactly been empty. We discovered recently that a guest had taken up residence here in our absence. It was an intrusion that might have had some fairly sizeable consequences, but thankfully a disaster was averted.

OK, so no one broke in. We didn't find anyone sleeping here. That would have been complicated, but actually kind of fine. No, we discovered that a squirrel had somehow made its way into the facilities, and, knowing what one does when one enters a church, it made its way to the Meetinghouse. It tore up a few pieces of paper, ate a cough drop or two, left a little mess, and then it must have made its way out. It found its way into the kitchen too, because it looked like someone had a party in there and didn't bother to clean up. It chewed through a peanut butter container to get at what was inside. A few days later, Mark found the body of the squirrel, now lifeless, in the hallway back by the kitchen. God only knows what happened, but, well, the squirrel's not with us anymore. And while I wish we could have just ushered him back outside, I'm thankful there wasn't any real damage that occurred – in the Meetinghouse or anywhere else.

But after I thought about it for a while, the image of the squirrel and the Meetinghouse began to take on a greater significance than I had at first imagined. It took on the shape of a metaphor for some of the realities we're experiencing now. Like democracy, for example. Like Meetinghouses, like structures and institutions everywhere, democracies require constant care and attention. Otherwise, when your back is turned, unwelcome creatures can find their way into various kinds of houses, and those creatures can do enormous damage before it's all through. Meetinghouses, white houses, houses of justice, all kinds of houses can be wrecked by squirrels, who enter a space, tear it up, and leave it in disarray. That's happened in a number of places around the world, and our democracy is no exception. Sometimes squirrels just need to be removed, lest they create further destruction in their wake.

But it's a wholly different aspect of the squirrel's visit that I really want to tease out today. Because I think it might also serve as a symbol for what many of us are feeling by now. Like the Meetinghouse itself, our bodies feel a little vacated. Our lives feel a little vacated. We've emptied ourselves of much that provided meaning and

structure to our days, and while I would argue that some of that emptiness might be productive and salutary, it means that other, less desirable things can begin to creep in and take up a permanent residence, like a squirrel. Emotionally, it might be a hovering sense of dread, or anxiety, or fear. It might be the temptation to blame others for the pain we're all experiencing. It might be anger, directed toward those who aren't distancing quite the way we are, or who are taking risks we ourselves wouldn't take. Left unchecked, and those emotions can tear through our inner lives, leaving us shredded.

But what I worry about more, however, is that we ourselves might be in danger of becoming the squirrels. We've sat still for far too long, we think. We've reached the outermost limits of our waiting. All those beaches, all those stores, all that open road just sits there vacant, and many of us are ready to pounce. I can appreciate that. I feel it too. But I'm not sure that we wouldn't be the ones leaving a catastrophic mess behind us by treating all of those now empty spaces as ours for the taking. We're all getting a little squirrely right now, which is pretty understandable, but I think we need to do our best not to become squirrels.

And so I have an idea. I'll need to tell you a story to explain the origins of what I'm going to propose. What I'm preparing to suggest won't solve all of our problems, and it won't eliminate the struggles that many of us are facing. But it might serve as a way to relieve some of the squirrelness many of us are feeling right now. It might take us deeper into what it means to live a life of faith. It might alleviate some of the tension we're feeling, reminding us of what it is to be in communion with one another, even as we're apart. In essence, what I wish to propose is a kind of sacrament that we might all participate in. It's all a way of avoiding the path of the squirrel. But first, let me tell you a story.

Many of you know that for past 19 years over Memorial Day Weekend, I've gathered whoever is crazy enough to join me for something called The Maryland Challenge. The Appalachian Trail runs through the state of Maryland for a little over 40 miles, and thru-hikers often challenge themselves to walk all 40 of those miles in a single day. I heard about that practice from a few friends who thru-hiked the trail, and a couple years after that I, and two other friends, Brian and David, decided to try it. Rachael's parents live at just about the halfway point in Maryland, and so we had a home base from which to begin and end. We started when it was still dark outside, and we walked all day, just talking and visiting. We stopped for meals, and then we kept moving. At about mile 30, Brian decided he had had enough. He caught a ride and went back to the house. David and I kept going. I won't lie. The last ten miles, over hilly terrain in the dark, felt like they would never end. But of course they did. And when it was over, we returned to Rachael's parents' house, and enjoyed a middle of the night meal unlike anything I had ever experienced before. The struggle and pain had transformed into something celebratory: "We did that!" we kept saying.

The following year, Brian wanted to prove to himself that he could make it to mile 40, and so we did it again, this time in a driving rain. But we got to the end, and that midnight meal? – it was just as fabulous, maybe more so. The next year a few more people came, and then it started to take on a life of its own. Some years there were just a handful of us. Some years the numbers swelled to as many as 20 or 25. Some people walked ten miles. Some people walked twenty, or thirty. A small core of five or six people always got to the end, often finishing late in the night. There was pain, but there

was also celebration and laughter. There was weariness, but there was also a giddy kind of joy, mostly at just being together.

Over the years, the Challenge has come to represent the reassurance of long-term friendships. It's come to represent the experience of a sojourn along an arduous path. It's come to represent the pleasure of having bodies that can move and do things, and it's come to represent the goodness of being in the natural world. It's come to represent the intoxication of a shared release after a difficult undertaking, and it's come to represent the sheer delight of rest when it's all over.

Above all, though, hurling ourselves along 40 miles of forest trail has come to feel like an apt expression for the life of faith, and what it means to endure and persevere. How many times does the New Testament compare faith to a test of endurance, to a race that we're all running? There's the book of Hebrews: "let us run with perseverance the race set before us (12.1)." There's the book of Acts, where the Apostle Paul speaks of not getting distracted, and "finishing my race with joy (20: 24)." There's the book of Galatians: "You were running a good race – who cut in on you and got you off track (5:7)?"

And then there's the book of Philippians. Paul writes about being able to endure all things, whether he is hungry or well fed, whether he has plenty or whether he has little. "I can do all things through the one who strengthens me," he concludes. Those words are especially important because they seem to have been written by Paul when he was under house arrest in Rome. Because of his faith, Paul had learned the secret of perseverance, knowing that whatever he was going through, he would be enabled to go on, because of God's presence, because of the grace that he had experienced. I can do all things, he concludes.

The Challenge represents all of that to me, and more. It is, if you will, a physical manifestation of an invisible reality. Which is to say, it is something like a sacrament.

Covid-19 has rendered the Challenge impossible this year. I mourned that for a while. But then I had an idea. This is the year to Challenge in Place. And it's also the year to invite all of you – and I mean that, all of you! – to do it with me. You see, I think we need a big shared experience to remind us of the shared ties that exist around here, to remind us that we're all still in this together, even while we're apart. We need ways to overcome the loneliness and isolation that we're all feeling to a greater or lesser extent. We need to move our bodies – nothing mitigates depression better than movement. We need a reminder that we're capable of more than we think we are – some scientists studying human endurance suggest that when we believe ourselves to be fully tapped, we've probably only used about 40% of our full potential. We need a symbol for the experience we're passing through, a tangible reminder that we can endure this, and that we can come out on the other side intact. We need a symbol of what it is to be on the journey of faith in the first place, where we're often asked to go beyond our limits, to make ourselves uncomfortable, and to trust that even in that discomfort we will be given the strength to endure, because God is with us. In other words, we need to restore a kind of sacramentality to our lives.

And so here's what I have in mind. Next weekend, Memorial Day Weekend, pick a Challenge that has to do with bodily movement. Ideally, it would be an activity that allows you to cover some kind of distance, whether by walking, running, biking, swimming, or paddling. And ideally, it would be something that would take you a little

while to get through. But it has to be your Challenge – appropriate to your abilities and circumstances. For some of us a 40- or 50-mile day is conceivable. For others of us, a couple times around the block, or around one of the trails at Essex Meadows, is a Challenge. That works. For others of us, a few loops around the yard, or around some parking lot, would be an appropriate Challenge. That works too. But there are other folks among us who no longer have the ability to walk, or run, or bike. Well, then, what about a series of movement challenges involving the arms? The Challenge is particular to you. You just have to pick it, and then do it.

Even though we're all still social distancing as best we can, the idea is to do this together while apart. And so next Saturday or Sunday, either the 23rd or the 24th, let's all of us undertake those Challenges. We're doing it over two days because, in households like ours, only one parent can disappear at a time. I'll support Rachael one day and she'll support me the other. The kids will join when and if they want. But couples could undertake a Challenge together. Families could do it with one another. Player's choice: you decide.

To make it communal, I want to create a church-wide picture and video collage of the experience that we can put up online. And so here's the other thing I'm asking. Before you start, take a picture of yourself, holding up a sign that names what your Challenge is. Send us a picture or two while you're doing it. Send us videos if you want. Nothing long, please. Then send us a picture of yourself when you're finished. We'll compile it all, and turn it into a kind of online art project, a document of FCCOL under quarantine. Send it to fccofoldlyme@gmail.com.

Now, let me speak to an objection that some of you might be harboring right now. Some among us might be thinking, "Uugh. I hate that kind of stuff. That would just suck." To which I say, "Could anything suck worse than what we're already experiencing? Let's do something different, something bold, something creative, something a little crazy, and just see what emerges. Because honestly, what do you have to lose? Have you seen the story of the ultrarunner who had trained for a 100-mile race that was cancelled? He ran 100 miles in his apartment, on his treadmill! Why not do something a little crazy right now? Some of the more pious among us will ask, "What does this have to do with God, or church?" My response is that it has to do with our bodily and collective well-being. It has to do with our flourishing as individuals, and as a community, which is, I believe, what God most desires for each of our lives: flourishing. Still others might object along different lines of piety, asking "What does this have to do with the very real justice issues that are emerging around Covid-19? Why not mobilize a project like that?" To that, I simply say, let this be a sacramental enactment of the work we're called to do, the way communion is a sacramental enactment of the sort of lives we're asked to live. Let the Challenge be a sacramental act, demonstrating the longsuffering and struggle we're all called to, demonstrating the community we're all called to, demonstrating the endurance and perseverance that we're all asked to undergo. Let it be a sign and a symbol of those realities. But let it also be a demonstration of the faith journey we're all of us making.

In just a moment, Lisa Feltes is going to sing a song written by John Rutter after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the release of Nelson Mandela from prison. It's called "Distant Land," and it speaks to what it is to journey toward something that seems a long way off. Discouragement arises, but walls do fall. Prisoners are released. Viruses and

house arrests and quarantines do come to an end. We can do all things, because we are strengthened by grace, strengthened by faith, strengthened by God. Let's undertake a symbolic journey together, one representing the walk toward that distant land we're all called to journey toward.

Let's take a lesson from the squirrel. Let's not be the ones charging back into all the empty spaces just because we can. Let's do our best not to make a mess of things. Let's channel all that very real and pent up energy toward something inspiring, something life giving, and something fun.

Next weekend. Let's do this. We gotta move... what do you say?