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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: I Corinthians 2: 1-10
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How Firm a Foundation?

I'd like to use this sermon to elaborate on the hymn that you heard Brian and Lisa sing: How Firm a Foundation. What I want to tell you today, what I wish to remind you of, is that despite all the unsteadiness and uncertainty about us, despite the pain and sorrow and anger that so many are feeling on this July 4th weekend, there is a firm foundation upon which we stand. It's not the foundation of a government. It's not the foundation of a creed. It's not the foundation of a document or that of noble deeds performed long ago. It is a foundation built upon a suffering body, the body of the man Jesus of Nazareth, in whom we see the hidden face of God.

I had hoped that we might be able to gather together this weekend. I had hoped to be able to greet some of you in person, and to be able to remind us all, as I do at the beginning of our worship services, that it's good to be together. What can I say, except what already has been said? I continue to believe that being outdoors, maintaining our distance, and wearing masks are effective ways of being together in these warmer months. But given the rise of cases throughout the South and West especially, none of us wished to test fate. And so we made the decision we did. To any of you who are disappointed, know that we're very sorry. But also know that we're doing our best to read the signs from moment to moment, which means shifting rapidly. I'm grateful that we have a community that's capable and willing to do just that.

Even so, I want to emphasize once again that despite our distance, we do remain together. I miss you, we miss you, something fierce, but that doesn't diminish the bonds that hold us fast, joined by a loving Spirit that binds us across all of our differences, and across all of the spaces in which we're living. Our task is to learn to trust that Spirit, to trust that it's still binding us and moving among us even if we can't gather in the way we might wish.

Still, as the weeks have piled up, I've realized ever more acutely how much I've missed all of you. I miss you when I preached to an empty meetinghouse, and when I've prayed before empty pews. I've missed you in those moments in our videos when we have a choir anthem, and the camera traces a path that has now become familiar to us all, moving from the front door and down the aisle, and eventually up into the pulpit area and into the pulpit itself – we have Brian Cheney to thank for that progression. I've missed you when I've spoken to many of you on the phone, and heard about how you're faring, or how your families are faring. I've missed being able to greet you at the door, being able to meet with you to discuss this or that, being able to stand with you at a graveside when someone we've loved has died. God, but I've missed you.

But it's not only you that I've missed. I've missed what it is that we do together in this place. The hymns and prayers, the spoken words and the sacred texts that we return to over and over again – I've missed that too. We're doing our best to reproduce that experience online, and Odile and John and Mary, especially, have labored mightily to make that happen. But it is different. It's a little more fragmented, a little more isolated,

and just a little bit thinner in terms of its narrative capacities. Let me explain what I mean by that.

When John Prine died back in March, I rediscovered a song from him that I had forgotten, a song called “Pretty Good.” It’s a song about the distance between what we say about our lives, and what’s actually occurring for us underneath the surface. When we’re asked how we are, we respond on cue: pretty good, not bad. Except the words conceal, sometimes even to ourselves, the anxieties and pressures and pain that many of us feel a lot of the time. I know that’s been especially true these last several months. When we check in with one another, for the most part, we respond that we’re holding up just fine. We have food. We have shelter. The money hasn’t run out for most of us, at least as far as I can tell right now. Most folks haven’t gotten sick, though by now many of us have had friends or family members who have. And so when we’re asked how we’re getting by, we respond, not dishonestly: Pretty good. Just fine.

But that doesn’t capture the whole of how we are. Many of us, most of us, are troubled. We’re worried about those we love. We’re worried about a disease that shows no signs of abating any time soon. We’re worried about the future, about the economy, and about a glaring lack of national leadership in the face of this crisis. But we’re also worried about the frayed edges of our democracy, and whether the accumulated pain from centuries of discrimination, injustice and racial inequality will finally unravel our social compact. We worry anew about the well being of our neighbors, especially the people of color in our lives that we love. We wonder about how to respond in morally meaningful ways to this moment, both personally and institutionally. I think it’s also true that some of us question, with something bordering close to despair, about just how deep white supremacy runs in our country and in our hearts, and just what it will require, finally, to rid ourselves of it. Now, it’s also true that many of us are finding reasons for powerful optimism as a result of the uprisings, as a result of the concerted efforts of so many across the racial and political spectrum, to say enough! Many of us *are* seeing the possibility of something genuinely new and good emerging in the world. Still, I think it’s safe to say that we’re all of us carrying heavy loads right now, and while some burdens are indeed greater than others, it’s important to acknowledge that we’re all carrying them. I think they’re getting to us.

That’s a large part of why I’ve missed you so much these past few months. I know, you haven’t gone anywhere, you’re still out there, and we’re still together. But what happens when we get together is that we collectively rehearse a story, a narrative, one that we believe to be deeper and truer than anything life can hurl at us: that there is a gentle and healing, but also refining presence in the world, one who loves you, calls to you, and believes in you. It’s a narrative that tells us, over and over again, that God holds you, God holds all of us, as we face down our worries, as we carry our burdens, and as we face into the deepest wounds, the deepest sins, of our country. It’s a narrative that insists that there is such a thing as unmerited grace, which is available to us all. It’s a narrative that tells us that it’s possible to change, and to get a little bit better every time we fail.

I don’t know about you, but I need to be reminded of that over and over again. I need to rehearse that narrative on the regular, because when I don’t, I tend to forget it. Those truths become a little less real, a little less tangible, because they’re reduced to another piece of information that you can read, watch, consume. Meanwhile, other,

harder, often crueler narratives begin to take precedence. Things like, you get what you deserve; money and power are everything; we're ultimately all alone; justice, fairness, and equality can never be achieved; our differences are too vast to overcome, our history is too terrible to be reckoned with. It's not that there aren't questions worthy of careful consideration in each of those statements. It's simply that, because of my faith commitments, I think there's something deeper and truer underlying our world than what those suspicions might reveal.

What I'm trying to tell you is that what we do actually has powerful consequences for our ordinary existence. The prayers and hymns, the scriptures and stories - they're weaving a counter-narrative for our lives that give us the courage to confront the pain of the world without flinching, and without turning away. They're weaving a counter-narrative of grace, forgiveness, and upholding, supportive love, which gives us the confidence to trust that no matter how difficult, no matter what truths might be revealed, no matter what unsteadiness we might feel, there is something firm beneath our feet that enables us to do the work we need to do.

That's why I chose to build this service around the hymn "How Firm a Foundation." Because we do possess a firm foundation upon which to stand, orienting us for whatever is ahead. We do have a firm foundation upon which to stand. FCCOL, I hasten to remind you, isn't the foundation upon which we stand. We testify to that foundation, but no mere church is identical with the firm foundation itself. The firm foundation, rather, is a paradox: it is the faith that we share in God, in Christ, who comes to us in the form of a bleeding man, laboring to breathe upon a cross of wood.

That's what Paul is talking about when he writes to the Corinthian church that he was determined to know nothing among them except Christ crucified. The firm foundation upon which we stand is a suffering body. Which is to say, the firm foundation is a form of steadiness built on top of an abyss, not unlike a boat on choppy waters. The boat, the foundation, rocks and sways, it shifts and moves, even as we learn to sway along with it. But if we understand that suffering body to be our foundation, the waves may toss us, and the wind may roar about us, but we won't go under.

If that sounds strange to you, I want you to hear it as good news. It means that God is right alongside of you, whenever you're troubled in body or spirit. It means that God is speaking to you, whispering to you, when the anxiety or the worry begin to feel as though they're too much. It means that whenever you suffer, God is there. It means that Jesus is right there with you.

But it also has everything to do with why our meetinghouse is draped in black, and why we publicly affirm, as the sign on our corner states, that Black Lives Matter. Because when we see something as horrific as George Floyd calling out for his mother while having his throat crushed, we see the image of Jesus. When we learn about Brianna Taylor, murdered in her bed, we see Jesus. When we hear story after story of the abuse and pain that far too many people of color have been forced to endure, we know instinctively that that's where Jesus lives, first and foremost: with, and among, all those lives that are so routinely told that they do not matter. People of faith know differently, because we see Jesus there. The firm foundation upon which we stand, the narrative of a God made flesh, and revealed in a suffering body, is itself a proclamation, now some 2000 years old, that Black Lives Matter.

Let me conclude by referencing a speech delivered on this weekend back in 1852, by Frederick Douglass. It's entitled "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," a speech that deserves to be read by everyone on this 4th of July weekend, and really every subsequent year as well. Douglass gives all due credit to the founding Fathers of America, calling them brave and noble men. But he goes on to say this:

Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.

It is, in part, the foundation upon which we stand, the foundation that is a suffering body, that allows us to hear and absorb those words ever anew. There is a vast gulf between those who can celebrate on a weekend such as this, and those who know that the liberties and freedoms being celebrated are not extended to them. In faith, we find the courage to stand within that gulf. In faith, we discover the resolve to move within it, and to take up the work that needs to be done. In faith, we discover that Jesus has always already taken up residence there, within that very gulf, and among those who mourn.

Oh, and one more thing. If anybody asks you about the proclamation that Black Lives Matter, tell them this: that statement represents a necessary, but also a very minimal, affirmation. Yes, black lives matter. But we ought to be able to say a whole lot more than that besides. That black lives have saved our country, over and over again. That black lives have taught the world so much about what freedom actually means. That black lives have given us gifts beyond measure, in cultural forms like music, language, dance, and creativity. That black lives have taught the world the very meaning of love. That black lives have led our country toward the freedom it has always espoused but rarely practiced. We in predominantly white communities need to practice what it means to say Black Lives Matter, and to have those words prominently displayed in our midst, for we have spent too long denying those words. But it is a minimal affirmation that we need to supplement with further affirmations as well, about the value, and dignity, and creativity, and love demonstrated to the world, and demonstrated to this country, by black life.

How firm a foundation? It's firm indeed, firm enough to guide us in an unsettling and uncertain time. How firm a foundation? It is firm indeed, when it is supported by the love of Christ. How firm a foundation? It is steady enough to give us our feet, when we recall that our faith has been forged upon a suffering body, one that loves the world, one that gives unreservedly to the world, one that invites us all to struggle, to mourn, and to build the beloved community that we still dare to hope for.

How firm a foundation...what more can be said than to you God has said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled.