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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Luke 17: 11-19; Psalm 100
 November 22, 2020

Silken Threads of Thanks

O Sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in...you hang by a slender thread...

– Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”

The Puritans have been on my mind for the last several months. For good or ill, I don't know, I recently revisited that most famous of Puritan sermons from that most famous of Puritan preachers, Jonathan Edwards. In his “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” he describes human beings dangling above the flames of hell, suspended aloft by a single spider's thread held by the hand of God. I no longer believe in the God Edwards depicts, nor do I believe in the fires of hell that he so fears. I do however believe in the scene Edwards creates, which is to say, I believe in the symbolism of the scene. It's what psychoanalysts call a primal scene, one that depicts the existential condition of human life. There are troubles into which we might all, each in our own way, stumble and fall. And there exists a spider's thread, a gossamer tendril holding each of us aloft. In actuality, I've come to believe there are multiple threads, a veritable spider's web, stretched across the abyss, all working to prevent our fall. Believing in that much, I must also confess a deeper belief: that those gossamer threads that hold us are ultimately attached to Something else. Or perhaps to a Someone else. That Something, that Someone, is an elusive Presence that some of us dare to name God. However hidden that Presence, however dimly perceived, it's possible to see the many shining tendrils that do bear us up. I believe in the silken threads which hold you, which hold me, suspended as if in mid-air.

This morning I wish to become a spider. I wish to spin a web. I wish these words, spoken to you, to become a series of tiny threads that will hold you aloft. But not only that. I wish these words might reveal the web that's been there all along, holding you, holding me, holding us all. They are miraculous, those tendrils, slender and delicate. Cut one or two, and the many others take up the slack. Cut many, and the entire web collapses. And yet together, they create a vast and thrilling and springy net, woven across the emptiness. I wish to become a spider this morning. I wish to spin a web for you.

I do so in the spirit of Thanksgiving. I do so in the spirit of offering thanks for each of the many tendrils composing the great net of the world. I do so in the spirit of a certain theology, which dares to sense the grace of the world, even a world haunted by the nothing of the abyss. And I do so in the spirit of democracy, for whatever their faults – and there were many - the Puritans, with Jonathan Edwards foremost among them, were also theorists of a radical democratic spirit. I spin my web as a means of giving thanks.

It's not only Puritans or preachers that spin webs. Grandmothers do that, and mothers too. My own mother spun a web this summer when our family ventured to Tennessee for a visit that felt both risky and necessary. Shortly after we arrived, my mom made each of the kids sit down with a piece of construction paper and some colored markers. They were asked to create a list of ten things that we were grateful for, even in the midst of Covid, even under conditions of deprivation. The kids did it, and then each of the adults did as well. We made our lists, we

decorated them, and then we all taped them on a doorway in the kitchen. We each of us wove a web, naming the things that sustained us. Then we combined them in a kind of public art display, the tendrils stringing themselves together. Though we dangled above an abyss, each list alone, and all of them combined, testified to the many ways we were prevented from falling.

In truth, it took a while to name the things for which we were thankful. Not because we didn't have such things to name, but because we were more accustomed to naming the dangers of the pit – the virus, the cabin fever, the exhaustion, to say nothing of the antidemocratic forces astir in the public. But then they started to flow. They were each of them small things, tiny things, thin little tendrils suspending us in the air. Some of us said we were grateful for Zoom calls with family or friends that we only rarely connected with. Some of us said we were thankful for more intentional time with one another. Some were grateful for the uprising of public conscience over the summer, as people mobilized to make right what has for so long been wrong in our country and our world. Some said they were thankful for daily walks, for meals lovingly cooked, for swimming, for backyards, for forest trails. One among us – he shall remain unidentified – said he was thankful that Bob Dylan had graced the world with a brilliant new album in a time such as this. We might have created a list of laments, and God only knows there was reason to. But grandmothers, and mothers too, often seem to know that greater power resides in the discipline – for it is a discipline, involving conscious effort – of giving thanks. For when we do, we notice the threads that bear us up, suspending us in midair. Each of our lists, joined together, revealed how vast, how complex, how wondrous that net actually was.

My list has only grown over the last several months. I sense the intricate interdependencies that bind us and hold us together. Those threads, usually invisible, now seem radiant, glinting and shimmering in the light. Take the schools. Every day I drop each of my children off at their respective buildings. And I marvel. Teachers show up. Administrators show up. Custodians and cafeteria workers, bus drivers and office staff – they each of them show up when I know for a fact that they are weary to the bone. Each and every one holds a tendril. It is nearly miraculous, what educators have managed to do. Let us give thanks.

And then I go to the Big Y. And there is fresh produce. Someone has grown it, and has picked it, and has shipped it, and has stocked it. And there are other foods, other ingredients – breads and coffee, eggs, milk, meats – and there are plants and animals that have given their lives that we might have such things, and there are people who have produced it, packaged it, delivered it, made it all available for our sustenance. They each of them hold a small, nearly invisible thread that suspends us above the abyss. Render thanks for them.

I think of the firemen. They've come to my house. They came to Laura's house last week. I don't often give conscious thought to the firemen, but when we need them they're there. People who are available at any time of the day or night, who wait to be called in times of trouble. And I think too of the police, who I recently visited. They reminded me that when we protested racial injustice this summer, they were on hand to block the flow of traffic for us. They reminded me that when Malik and Zahida were in sanctuary, they were on call to prevent harassment or violence. Indeed, when our Black Lives Matter flag was vandalized, and when I received an email threatening violence, it was the police that received my worried call. They all of them hold a thread. Give thanks for their presence.

I think of the physicians. I think of the nurses. I think of the orderlies and the building staff who run the hospitals. I think of the pain they've witnessed, the sorrow and anguish they've felt. I think of their unceasing ministrations. There are those among their charges who

have been lost. There are those who have been spared. But there are those practiced and skilled in the art of bodily healing, and they hold their threads. To them, offer thanks.

We must name the scientists too – the researchers, the lab techs, the chemists. Consider them – at Pfizer, and Moderna, racing for a vaccine that will curtail the pandemic. See their silken threads, for they hold us above the pit. For them, we offer our deepest thanks.

But there are also those skilled in the art of emotional and of mental healing. The counselors and psychologists, the social workers and all of those with a sympathetic ear – they too hold the spider's silk. But so too do the culture bearers, those who sing the songs, those who tell the stories, those who challenge and provoke with fierce and urgent beauties. There are those who take to the streets, to urge adherence to moral and ethical principles that are too often found missing. There are the journalists, who insist on truth and accuracy in reporting. They are all spinners of webs, purveyors of silk, weavers of the net that bears us all up. For all of them, each and every one, we offer our praise, and our thanks.

It's true of FCCOL too. Each of you is a bearer of silken threads. Each of you helps spin the web. I'm grateful to be a part of a functional community like this one. It helps to make the burdens we do often feel a little less burdensome. When a friend of ours died last year, it made me wonder how people face such losses, such storms, without a community to turn to for strength and support. Communities such as this help to hold people up when they hang above the pit. But there's more. I'm thankful for your incredible generosity. In a time when churches and non-profits and businesses are struggling, you've helped to keep this place financially sound. That's a tendril you hold. I'm thankful for the time – the countless hours – that so many people spend volunteering in this place, even during Covid. Our Food Pantry, the New London Soup Kitchen, our Boards, the Ladies Who Stitch, each of you holds a thread. And all of you who show up on the lawn on Sundays, sometimes huddled under blankets, you too possess the silken strand. It might be otherwise. You might go away. If too many people did, the web would collapse. But it hasn't. It hasn't. I want you to know how thankful, how grateful I am to all of you, those who are here and those watching at home, who spin your threads of support.

And I'm thankful for our dedicated staff, who keep on adjusting and improvising to meet new situations. Mark Testori never imagined he'd be running a sound board. Odile didn't imagine she'd be our in-house video producer. John Kiker didn't plan on running an entire communications campaign for us. Bob didn't plan on all the extra office responsibilities that have come as a result of Covid. Last I knew, Carleen was supposed to be half retired, but it's never stopped her from being 100% dedicated to this place, to you. Neither Laura nor Lisa figured on running a Sunday School program that involved social distancing, or that had to take place on Zoom – but they've figured out how to do it. Mary didn't know she'd wind up being a videographer, and yet here she is. And Simon...we barely see him anymore, because he's up at the organ, invisibly providing the music, and orchestrating the many incredible musicians we've had at these services. I sing their praises. We all should. Because listen: it could all be so different. Not everyone is capable, or willing, to rise to the occasion like that. They are all spinners of silken thread, holding up the world. Or holding up this world, at any rate.

You do that too. Not only here at church, but in your families, in your jobs, in your conversations, in your financial commitments. Have you ever considered that? The thread you spin, the strand you hold, helps to keep the whole web, the entire net, strong and steady. It's like that in communal life, in public life. It's like that in democracy. Each person holds an integral thread, and together, they weave a fine mesh suspended over the pit. Any one of them, any one of you, might walk away. Any singular person might reach for the blade and sever the

connection. Some have. Some do. They're doing it right now. But the greater the number of threads, the denser their weave, the greater is the chance that the net will hold, no matter the snip of the scissors, the hack of the blade, the loosening of the bonds. All the smaller tendrils have a catching, saving power.

I believe in the spider's thread. I believe in those many gossamer strands that each of us is holding, that each of us hangs upon. I trust that they're strong enough to hold us. I'm powerfully grateful for every last one of them. I believe the threads themselves point toward something of the divine, something of God, in each and every one of us. Because there's something within us that's given us the power to become spinners of webs. There's something within us all that grants us the will to hold on to those threads, lest the whole of it collapses. Perhaps it's self preservation. Perhaps it's in the very nature of our sociality. But I choose to think it's because we know that above and beyond the tiny strands that hold us up, a still greater thread has already kept us from falling. Call it what you wish. But I imagine it as a loving Someone who holds the world aloft, pushing back the chaos, gentling the Night.

And so give thanks, for each and every one of those tiny threads is holding you. Give thanks, because each and every one prevents you from falling. Give thanks for the intricate web of supportive love and grace beneath you. May that web bear you up, hold you, and enfold you. May you sense the love woven into it. May those silken threads catch and hold you fast.