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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Luke 1: 46-55; Luke 3: 1-3, 10-14; Acts 2: 1-4, 43-47

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### “The Heart of a Heartless World”

Churches around the world today mark what is called Pentecost Sunday, the 7<sup>th</sup> week after Easter. It's the day on which Christians mark the arrival of the Holy Spirit, which descends upon the first disciples in the book of Acts, chapter 2. They become ecstatic. They speak in strange languages, though they all understand one another. As a result, they embark upon an experiment in communal living, sharing all their goods with one another, ensuring that no one was in need. Pentecost Sunday, and that description of the early church, has furnished both fervent dreams and acute unease among readers ever since. What does the story mean for the ways people of faith organize their lives, and what are its demands upon us? Just how seriously are we to take that vision of the earliest church?

With that text, and those questions, as background, I'd like to share another question that I received by email earlier in the week. It concerned the profile that *The New London Day* ran last Sunday, about my background, and about some of our work here at FCCOL. The aspect of the article that received the most attention had to do with the fact that I once taught a course on the writings of Karl Marx. The question in the email was, “can you help those of us in the congregation understand why Marx is important to you? It might help some of us if we're asked about it.”

It's a good question, and a worthy concern. No doubt it's a question some of you have fielded, or have wondered yourself. And so I thought it might be helpful to offer a few thoughts on the matter this morning. In particular, I want to address why those writings might matter to a Christian minister, and what they might have to do with the practice of religion. But let me offer a little context, as well as a few caveats, before proceeding further.

Prior to arriving at FCCOL, I offered a course entitled “Marx and his Readers” at Harvard Divinity School. It was in the fall of 2012, and approximately 30 students enrolled in the class. It remains one of the most exciting teaching experiences I've ever had. I offered it not because I'm a Marxist – I am not – and not because I hoped that people would join the Party – I'm not even sure what that would mean these days. Still less did I wish for students to become strict adherents of the texts. But I did want them to engage the ideas contained in those texts – questions about why we work, how commodities are made, where alienation comes from, what economic systems do to human bodies, questions about how all people, not just a few, might flourish - because those ideas continue to shape the modern world. But more to the point, they have shaped, and continue to shape modern religion, and modern Christianity, in significant ways.

By way of further background, I should also note that I taught a lot of different classes at Harvard over the years, and I assigned a lot of different texts, from Plato and the Bible to Thomas More, Toni Morrison, and Octavia Butler. One class dealt with aesthetics, but I have

never been called a scholar of aesthetics. Another dealt with conceptions of heaven, and paradise, but I have not been called a scholar of paradise. Still another had to do with global Christianities, but I have not been called a scholar of global religion. Marx is the one that sticks. Well, so be it. Pentecost Sunday is as good a time as any to talk about it.

I've mostly avoided speaking that name – Marx – from the pulpit. That's because the name is so prone to misuse and misunderstanding, and it's often hard to be heard after uttering it. It invites antipathy, derision and caricature. For many, it connotes sympathy with totalitarianism, authoritarianism, violence, and persecution. It invites associations of gray, drab landscapes, where everything, and everyone, is the same. It suggests, for many, the suppression of individuality, and creativity. It suggests the eradication of religion. It suggests antagonism toward money. Finally, it connotes, for many people, atrocities like gulags and forced reeducation. There's reason to be wary, for atrocities have been committed in the name of Marx, and few people, myself included, wish to be associated with them. I'm confident that the same would be true of Marx himself. On the other hand, far more atrocities have been committed in the name of Jesus over the centuries, and we continue to find ways back to an authentic core of Jesus's teachings. Perhaps that can help us to hold in abeyance, just for a little, the misgivings some of us may have about the name of Marx.

So why teach a course on Marx in a divinity school? Start here. It's simply impossible to understand the world of modern religion, especially modern Christian thought, without at least some understanding of what Marx and his readers had to say. Name most any theologian of the late 19th, the 20th and now the 21st centuries, and you'll find that Marx was a major interlocutor. Walter Rauschenbusch, Dorothy Day, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and lately Marcella Althaus-Reid were all passionate readers of Marx. Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian, was known as the "Red Pastor" when he was a young minister in a rural Swiss town, helping to organize miners there. Paul Tillich wrote a systematic theology that adopted Marx's notion of alienation in order to understand the workings of sin. Walter Rauschenbusch formed the social gospel movement after pastoring a church in Hell's Kitchen in New York City, witnessing what people were suffering in tenement housing there. Guess who he was reading? Rauschenbusch influenced one of the previous ministers here in Old Lyme, Howard Wells, who brought those teachings here, and later took them to Cleveland, where he also served a congregation. (In fact, we probably ought to read Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* together sometime - it was the text that helped our church pivot toward who we've become).

But let's keep going. Dorothy Day created the Catholic Worker movement, in part, because she was influenced by Marx's writings. Reinhold Niebuhr got his start as a minister in Detroit – what he saw in the factories there led him to join the Socialist Party for a time. No less than Martin Luther King, Jr. was a reader of Marx and called himself a socialist during his entire public career. W.E.B. DuBois, one of King's predecessors and a powerful shaper of the black social gospel, did the same. Marcella Althaus-Reid, one of the most exciting theologians of the past twenty years, was shaped by encounters with Marx. And that's not even mentioning Roman Catholic liberation theology –all of which is dependent upon Marx's insights. None of the thinkers I've mentioned were simple adherents of Marx. They were readers, and sometimes very critical readers, of Marx. But they needed a certain version of Marx in order to help make sense

of the world around them. In particular, they needed a version of him in order to make sense of the suffering bodies, and the cruel economic inequalities that they all encountered in their various ministries.

But they had another reason for reading him. They each saw in Marx's writing an affinity with themes found in the Hebrew prophets ("Let justice roll down like waters," says the book of Amos), and in the New Testament. The Gospel of Luke, in particular, announces its concern for the poor in the very first chapter, when Mary sings her Magnificat: my soul magnifies the Lord, she sings, going on to describe how God removes the powerful from their thrones while lifting the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, while sending the rich away empty. That same concern is embodied in the preaching of John the Baptist, who puts the matter simply: whoever has two coats must share with those who have none. Those early clues set the stage for everything that happens in Jesus's ministry, where he goes out of his way to demonstrate God's love for what he calls "the least of these."

But the outcome of that ministry can be found in the ecstatic community we encounter on Pentecost Sunday, in Acts chapter 2. Acts, by the way, is part 2 of Luke's Gospel. Because of Jesus, because of the love he demonstrated, the early disciples are joined across cultures, across languages, across all sorts of differences, reveling in their common humanity. That shared sense of humanity, found in the Spirit of the risen Jesus, allows them to share their possessions with one another as well. Study the books of Luke and Acts with those introductory passages in mind, and you'll see how the world of the Spirit is always joined to the material conditions of people's lives – especially their economic lives. That's why all those theologians and ministers were able to find such affinities between Marx and Christian faith. They had learned it from the Bible. It had been taught to them first by Mary, by John the Baptist, by Jesus, and by the disciples.

Still, that alliance between religion and Marx might be surprising to some of you. Why would religious thinkers come to interact with a writer who wished to rid the world of religion? Did Marx not say that religion is the opiate of the masses, that which dulls our critical instincts, filling us with illusions? No doubt he levied some harsh criticisms toward religion, but a certain religious spirit, especially that found in the prophets, circulates through all of Marx's texts. His maternal grandfather was a rabbi, as was his uncle. His father's side of the family produced a long line of rabbis as well. Religion was in Marx's bones, and while he rightly railed at the ways religion was used as a pacification technique, he also left some openings for religion that later theologians have found profoundly helpful. For the purposes of this sermon, I want to focus in on that one famous quote, and then build off of it. Listen to what Marx actually said. He does indeed say that religion is the opium of the people, but just prior to that, he writes, "Religion... is the heart of a heartless world. (Religion) is the soul of soulless conditions." Only after that does he say "it is the opium of the people."<sup>1</sup>

An opiate, as we have lately been reminded, is a painkiller. And what Marx was witnessing was a world of unmitigated pain among ordinary people, as bodies and lives were being ravaged by industrialization, and the onset of this thing we call "a consumer society." The moral center of *Capital Vol. 1* is a long section called "The Working Day," in which Marx chronicles in

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, Karl, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right." Retrieved as a pdf from The Marx Internet Archive.

heartbreaking detail the broken lives and bodies of workers in factories, their lives wrecked by the drive for profits. By chronicling that pain, Marx faces squarely into that pain, chasing the scream, as a journalist named Johann Hari so memorably put it in his work on opiate addiction. Moral courage requires us to chase the scream, even as we who call ourselves people of faith are charged with introducing heart and soul into places where those qualities have been absent. Many of us these days wish to say that the conditions that Marx rightly deplored in industrial sites have been improved, and in some places that's undeniably true. But often, the kind of conditions that so horrified Marx have simply been exported offshore, out of sight and out of mind – to Haiti or to Africa, to the Philippines or to Bangladesh or many other places like those. Though we do our best to tame it, capital seems to reproduce those crises in every generation. There continues to be a need, in other words, to become the heart of a heartless world, and to embody soul, even under soulless conditions.

But what about you, Steve? Where are you in all this? Those are the questions that started this sermon, and they hang suspended over everything I've said thus far. Marx had his factories, and Dorothy Day had her tenements. Walter Rauschenbusch had his Hell's Kitchen, and Niebuhr had his automotive plants. Those had catalyzing effects on their thinking. One such catalyzing event for me was standing at a slave fort in Ghana as a 17 year old, contemplating the world, and the conditions, that made such a site possible. That's a story I shared several months ago, and I won't repeat it here. By far, though, the most important catalyzing event for me was the year I spent working as a chaplain at Bridgeport Hospital. It's one of the hardest things I've ever done. Every day brought visit after visit with people suffering the afflictions and ailments of life in a struggling city, hollowed out by deindustrialization. Taken individually, they all seemed like hard cases, but in the aggregate, patterns began to emerge. There were the cases of severe diabetes, and the amputations that ensued. There were the children suffering from respiratory issues, the babies born prematurely to mothers struggling with addiction, the burn victims and those suffering from severe mental conditions. There were the shootings and the stabbings, and the chronic conditions that worsened from neglect, simply because regular care wasn't available. So much of it was attributable to economics, and to a basic lack of care for the poor and the struggling in our society. It had to do with bad housing, bad food, a struggling school system, a lack of work, and all the aftershocks that flow from those things. I began to imagine the hospital as a kind of judgment seat, where a sentence, issued by society, was stamped upon the body. The harshest stamps by far were reserved for the poor, and especially people of color.

That experience did two things for me. It opened those texts from Marx in a new way, informing how I taught while at Harvard. Economic and social questions matter for religion, and for the life of the Spirit. Marx helped me to see that it was possible to both imagine, and work for, a world where those forms of suffering are unnecessary. But it also called me back to religion, not as an illusion and not as an opiate, but as the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. I needed that heart. I needed that soul. I remember feeling so reassured when I would sit in church that year, surrounded by a community who cared for me, and who gave me the courage to continue facing into all that pain. It was one of the moments in my life that I came to trust that the Spirit of Jesus was living and active somehow, accompanying me in that difficult work. But more than that, I came to trust that that same Spirit accompanied those I met every day at Bridgeport Hospital. And so even as that experience opened a certain Marx for me,

it also brought me back to Luke, and to Acts, and to Jesus. It's a strange combination, I know. I can only say that, by far, I'm not the first to discover it.

I carry all those things with me still. I think about them with regard to our mission partnerships, all of which have to do with the tragic aftershocks of different versions of settler colonialism, which was driven by the motions of capital. But I also think about them in relation to what we do here every week. Here, I return to Pentecost, and the question that event raises: what does it actually mean to be a church? Just what are those early passages of Luke, and Acts, telling us? Perhaps it helps us to understand that the emotional and bodily strains many of us do experience have to do with the demands placed upon us by capital. Even if we have plenty, we're haunted, and chased, by the prospect that it's all going to run out. Much of what we feel and think and do is rooted in economic necessity. If that's true of us, it's doubly, triply, true of those who have far less. What I sense is Mary, and John, and Jesus, and the disciples, and the Spirit itself asking if we've ever even heard from our deepest selves, asking if the way we've organized our lives might be preventing us from having a deeper relationship with God, with ourselves, and with our neighbors. Might the Spirit be challenging us, goading us, inviting us to trust that perhaps we do have enough, and perhaps we can risk giving more of what we have away? Might it be that every time we do, the Spirit of the Risen Christ greets us with a calm and a peace that often eludes us? Might it be that when we do, a kind of ec-stasis, ecstasy, a going out of ourselves takes place, one that fills us with a love for the world? Might it be so?

I don't expect you to feel the same way. I don't expect you to agree – about Marx, about Pentecost, about any of it. Here as ever, our church constitution puts it beautifully: “every member shall have the undisturbed right to follow the Word of God according to the dictates of his or her own conscience, under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.” There is immense freedom in that, and it is, I submit, a great gift of the Congregational tradition, and of this church in particular. That means you're under no obligation to agree with me or anyone else for that matter. You're under no obligation to defend something you may not wish to defend. You have only to say, “I see it differently,” for we have covenanted to love one another across our differences, and to celebrate our particular idiosyncrasies. I have put my own on display this morning. I feel more than a little vulnerable in doing so. What I hope is that as a result, you'll be afforded the freedom to do exactly the same, to speak who you are, trusting that we're bound by that same living Spirit that came to dwell within the disciples on Pentecost Sunday, trusting that despite our differences of language, we can still understand each other, and love one another.