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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: I Corinthians 12: 14-26
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Why Church?

It's been a full service – more than full – and so I've promised to be very brief. If some Sundays the wish is to swing for the fences, other Sundays merely require a base hit or better yet, a bunt from the preacher – the team does the rest. So it is on a Sunday as packed as this one.

What I wish to do this morning is to spend a little time reflecting on the significance of this thing we call church. After all, we've welcomed new members into our community. We've baptized Elijah into the life of the church. We've heard a few words from the Board of Stewardship about supporting the church. And so I thought it might be helpful to think for just a few moments about why we persist in this stubborn habit called church. Why bother? And why bother now? I'd like to come at this from three angles: why the church might be important for young people; why it might be especially important during and following a pandemic; and why it might be important as we continue to sort through all that's taken place over the past four to five years in this country.

Let's start with young people. Perhaps now would be the time to admit that during the pandemic, we've had more conversations in our house than we've ever had about why church might be important, even necessary. In our house, and maybe in yours too, there have been questions about why any of this is relevant for an adolescent. It is, admittedly, a long way from TikTok and gaming videos on YouTube. To children and young people, but really to all of us, I would say that it's true – we'll never be able to compete with the apps on your phone for holding your attention. Our algorithms just aren't as sophisticated as all that. And it's empirically true that apps, games, and music videos are way more fun than what we do here. There are some churches, I suppose, that bend over backwards to try to hold your attention in the same way, but to my mind anyway, they always lose.

To all that, I would argue that we need places in our lives that are going to help us feel anchored when it feels like our lives are coming unmoored – because sometimes we feel just like that: unmoored. We need places where older folks, people who aren't within our nuclear families, know our names, and care about how we're doing. We need places that help us to ask the big questions about life – who am I? Why am I here? Is there anything beyond me? What does it mean to be a good person? How do I build meaningful relationships? What is a just society? We don't have to come to the same conclusions about those things, but we do need places that help us to think big thoughts, and to dream worthy dreams, about things beyond wealth, fame, or popularity. But finally, I would say that we need places that can encourage us to believe that Someone, that God, cares for us deeply, enough to number the very hairs on our heads. Sometimes it feels like things are going to pieces, and if the deepest stories we know to turn to were created yesterday for Netflix, I think we're going to feel pretty empty, ultimately. What I want, for young people but for all of us, is for this to be a place that can ground us all in something so much bigger than our passing cares. That's what I'd say to young folks. But to the

rest of us, those of us quite a few years beyond adolescence, I would offer that if young people are saying that what we do is a little dull, well, we might listen. And we might open ourselves to a little more fun from time to time. It's worth a thought.

Now the pandemic. As we've preached to empty pews, and offered prayers on behalf of a remote congregation throughout this past year, it's sometimes been challenging to recall why we continue to conduct services at all. That was compounded by the fact that every person, it seemed, and every institution, began pumping out so much online content that it became hard to sort through what was meaningful, and what wasn't. No doubt the same has been true for FCCOL. Still, now more than ever, the language of religion, and the experience of religion, has become urgent and necessary. For the past 14 months, the sky has hung low. In one way or another, death has drawn near. The American evasion of death as a human reality, such a prominent feature of our national character, has lately become impossible to ignore. How are we to confront that most difficult, indeed that most terrifying, feature of human life? We can become depressed and anxious about it all. Many of us have. But church, and the very practice of faith, can also provide us with the resources to confront that truth with honesty, with courage, and with a touch of grace. Our communal practice gives us the ability to draw close to one another in our common frailty. It provides us with enough honesty to be able to say, "Sometimes I feel scared, or alone, or worried – how about you?" To give voice to those feelings, and to do it in the company of others, is itself a balm for the soul. But we're given more still. With one another, we find the confidence to declare that in life and in death, we belong to God. We're given the boldness to say, with the Apostle Paul, O death where is thy sting, and O Grave, where is thy victory? That's because we trust that one greater than us walks beside us, and is there to receive us when our time draws toward a conclusion.

But so too, in this time of profound isolation and separation, it's become clear that we need one another, and that we all have something vital to offer. You don't have to suspend your questions when you come here – hopefully you bring them. You don't have to suppress your doubts and misgivings, if such you have, when you arrive here – hopefully you bring those too. They're a part of you, integral components of who you are as individuals, and we need fully orbed individuals in all of their – your, our – contradictory glory around here. It is as Paul says in I Corinthians: those aspects are each of them members of who we are in our individual lives. They form who we are, which we then bring to a wider communal whole. I hope the pandemic has given us eyes to see, and better yet, to feel, that old biblical truth.

Finally, I believe churches like ours are important as we reckon with, and counter, the toxic effects of the past five years. When Bibles and churches have been used as backdrops for the support of repressive police power, and when crosses and prayers to Jesus were claimed by insurrectionists on January 6th, it takes courage to insist that Christian faith is something entirely different than what often passes as such in public life. But that's exactly what we demonstrate every week. We demonstrate that faith has to do with discovering a common core of humanity that we share with people everywhere, one that allows us, as we say in the Benediction every week, to honor all people. Christian faith has to do with strengthening the fainthearted, supporting the weak, and helping those who suffer. It has to do with holding on to what is good – to that which restores dignity to each person, but especially to those who have too often been mistreated and misunderstood. It has to do with establishing norms of decency and care. But

authentic faith also has to do with saying a firm “no” to those forces that would use Christianity as a tool to enforce narrow and exclusionary visions of human life. It’s tempting to wash our hands and simply be done with it all. It’s tempting to take the easy route, to say that since religion has been the cause of so much suffering, we should just walk away from it. I get that, I suppose. But how much more bold to wrest those symbols away from such distortions, and to say, that’s not the God I believe in, that’s not the faith I practice. We need such bold proclamations of God’s wide mercy, grace, and yes, justice, so that, as Harvey Cox once put it, we don’t leave the garden to the snakes.

A good many people have wondered what will become of churches in the wake of the pandemic. I for one am not especially worried. I think there will be a hunger for communities of mutual love and support as we move into whatever life will be when this is over. I predict there will be a need for communities like this one to demonstrate that a public, progressive Christian faith is more relevant than ever. I believe there will be a greater need, among young people and older folks alike, for places that allow for big questions and worthy dreams. And I believe each of us will have a role to play, some as beating hearts and some as untiring feet, some as strong arms and some as discerning eyes, some as calculating minds and some as the stable and supportive spine, of the world that we shall enter into on the far side of the pandemic. In the words of the hymn: “should the threats of dire predictions cause us to withdraw in pain, may God’s blazing phoenix spirit resurrect the church again.”