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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Mark 14: 12-16, 22-25
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You Can Do This Hard Thing

At the risk of embarrassing them, I want to say at the outset that I wrote this sermon with my daughter Sabina and my wife Rachael in mind. I wrote it with Elsa and Augie in mind, all of whom are this weekend, with varying degrees of intensity, quieting their fears, their misgivings, and their uncertainty, as they prepare to go back to school in the midst of a pandemic. I wrote this with them in mind, but really, it's a sermon for all the kids who are about to return to school for the first time in five months, wondering what this new reality is going to be like, and how long it might last. It's a sermon for parents, who are concerned about keeping their kids, their teachers, and themselves healthy. And it's a sermon for those who, whether students or parents, teachers or administrators, have struggled with the decision about returning to school, and who have come to a different conclusion, choosing to opt out rather than opt in. This is a sermon for all of you.

But it's for others too. School administrators have had a herculean task, figuring out how to keep students and staff safe, while also making contingency plans for all the unknowns that may occur throughout the year. They have my utmost admiration, and I for one am grateful for the diligence and care they've invested in this moment. In an era of so much institutional dysfunction, to witness the competent and steady leadership of so many educational leaders is nothing short of inspiring. That's how I felt as I watched a Zoom presentation this past week from the Lyme/Old Lyme schools about their reopening plans – a mix of gratitude and awe at the sight of ordinary folks stepping up to meet an extraordinary moment. I feel that way about all the teachers out there, quietly making their preparations. When Ken Burns makes a documentary series about the pandemic, I hope it focuses, in part, on educators, and their heroic efforts to help our children keep on growing in the face of so much adversity. And so to all the administrators and teachers, to all the staff who run offices and serve as aides, who prepare food and who clean after the day is done – this one's for you too.

Everyone has had to make some careful and calculated decisions about how best to proceed with this year, and it hasn't been easy for anyone, I know. There isn't, so far as I can tell, a single right answer on how best to proceed. And so we've all made our choices as best we can. Having made our decision, and now toeing the starting line, our feelings run deep – excitement but also fear, anxiety but also cautious optimism, confidence but with a dash of worry as well. Whatever comes, we all sense the challenges ahead, knowing the year will demand much from us.

What I want to say to all of you is something simple but true, something I believe in my bones: you can do this hard thing. *We* can do this hard thing.

I've said that this is a sermon for students and parents, for teachers and administrators and staff, and it is. But it's not only for them. It's for all of you out there who are faced with insurmountable tasks, things that you can't imagine getting through: not seeing the people you love most, let alone hugging them; showing up at a job, any

job, that feels scary right now; laid off or wondering how to pay the bills; sitting in loneliness and waiting for this moment to pass; facing loss, or illness, or sadness, or apprehension. Which is to say, most all of us in one way or another. This is for you too. I want to say to you as well: you can do this hard thing.

That phrase leapt out at me recently when I came across the printed words of a song by that title, from an artist named Carrie Newcomer. It begins with a child hunched over a table, brought to tears by the difficulty of finishing a math assignment she doesn't understand. A patient and compassionate adult sits with the child and encourages her, telling her "you can do this hard thing." I recognized that child. Perhaps you can too. I remember what it was like to be her. And I recognized that patient adult in my own parents, even as I hope I've managed to be that person from time to time as well. Sometimes, when we become overwhelmed, there's a small scared child inside of each of us, and sometimes that child still needs to hear someone say, "You can do this hard thing."

Newcomer then adds another image, this time of a young woman, leaving home for the first time. Someone she loves – a parent? A close friend? – hugs her goodbye. She's a bundle of apprehension, unsure if she's got what it takes to meet whatever new challenges she'll be facing. But then that steady assurance finds her again, as it did when she was a child, reassuring her that she does have what it takes. You can do this hard thing comes the voice – and she can. Once again I recognized that young woman, and perhaps you do too, remembering what it was like to say goodbye to someone and to head out on our own. Sometimes, I think, there's an apprehensive young person still living inside each of us, standing at a crossroads, scared to head out into something unfamiliar. And maybe that young adult inside of us needs to hear or feel someone say, yet again: You can do this hard thing.

Another image follows, this time a midnight phone call made to a friend after something painful has occurred – we don't know what. Maybe it's a difficult prognosis or maybe it's the unexpected death of someone precious. Whatever it is, the pain feels unbearable, and the narrator doesn't want to be alone. The friend on the call listens, and becomes that voice of reassurance, telling the caller that she'll be there for her, and that she can do this hard thing. That moment too feels familiar. To hear the steadying and reassuring voice of a friend when things feel dark – it can make all the difference in the world. Sometimes, the lonely and lost people we so often are, sometimes we need to hear or feel that gentle voice telling us once again: you can do this hard thing.

I think those series of images convey much of what it is to be a person of faith, no matter how we might organize the particulars of our beliefs. It is to know that sometimes we're the child or young adult needing that word of encouragement before stepping off into the unknown. It is to become that voice of assurance for another, who in any given moment might be feeling pretty unsteady. It is to trust that there is something, or better, Someone, who is gently affirming and supporting us in whatever the Unknown way might deliver. When I read the Bible, when I read theology, I understand it all as a way of giving content to that basic feeling. There is something in the world that wishes us all well, and that quietly and confidently whispers: You can do this hard thing.

One of the many things that's gone missing during this time of Corona has been the celebration of the sacraments. We have two – baptism and communion. Both of them are ways of demonstrating that basic affirmation of life and faith. Both are ways of

saying, You can do this hard thing. What is baptism other than a way of saying just that at the beginning of a life? What is baptism other than a way of affirming that amidst the many dangers, toils and snares we're all forced to confront in the course of our lives, there's something, or better, Someone, who holds us, who guides us, who comforts and cares for us, who encourages and supports us, who loves and strengthens and shelters us? What is baptism if not a public demonstration to children and to parents that through it all, they can do this hard thing called life? Sometimes having a whole community affirm that for you can give you the confidence you need to get through all sorts of tricky or painful life situations. Someone holds you close, we tell those parents and children, and sometimes that makes all the difference.

The same is true of communion. That too is a whispered word of encouragement amidst life's perplexities, a gentle embrace at a fork in the road, a way of assuring and reassuring that you can do this hard thing called life. During that last evening with his friends, Jesus knows well the hard thing that is about to befall him, the hard thing that's about to befall each of them. He's offering them a way through it. Remember what it feels like to be here, together, eating this bread and drinking this cup, and you can do this hard thing. Remember the love that I've shown you, that I've given you, that you've given each other, and you can do this hard thing. Remember that there's something beyond you that bears you up, helping to carry you along, and you can do this hard thing. In the bread and the cup, Jesus is offering his friends something to cling to, a tangible reminder that will help them get through the hard thing that was about to occur. It's a kind of blessing, really, that Jesus is offering, a life event that his followers could and would use to steer and strengthen themselves through the many trials to come. Take this bread. Drink this cup. You can do this hard thing.

In each of our lives, we experience events around which we orbit, coming back to them again and again for the meaning those events convey. There's been a lot of work and research over the years on negative events, the way abuse or trauma winds up shaping a life decades after the original occurrence. We need those studies, but I wish there was a corresponding understanding of the way good events, like a sacrament, like a blessing, can shape us as well. I wish there was a corresponding field of study about how we can orbit the goodness of something again and again, and draw strength from it when we need it. Those are the kinds of events that help us to know that we can do a hard thing. It's not that PTSD isn't real. It's only that there are other things in the world too. Call it Post Blessing Strength Syndrome, PBSB. Or something like that.

Those events have been true in my own life, and I'm willing to bet they've functioned that way for you too. It's just that, too often, we're not trained to pay attention to those kinds of events. We're not encouraged to believe that something important is at work there, something that can help us to do a hard thing. Part of what's made this season so poignant for me is that my daughter Sabina is, this very summer, the same age I was when I had one of those orbital PBSB moments. I've been circling around that moment for almost thirty years now, and I expect to be doing the same for as long as I live. I wish I could recreate it for her, but I can't. All I can do is to describe it, and say what it did for me. To put it in language can make it feel flimsy, at the edge of becoming saccharine. It's been anything but that for me. I offer it in hopes that maybe it will prompt some of you to recall a PBSB moment that have occurred in your life, when you've heard or felt something or someone telling you: You can do this hard thing.

It was the summer between my eighth and ninth grade year, and my family had recently relocated from central Pennsylvania to southwestern Ohio the previous year. I had made a few friends during that year, but the thought of starting high school filled me with a special kind of dread. I felt anonymous and lost and scared, at a time of life when kids already tend to feel those things.

Just prior to the beginning of ninth grade, our family went back to Pennsylvania for a family reunion that lasted from Friday through Sunday. My great grandparents, farmers with an earthy humor and an easy piety, were still alive, and they were at the center of it all. Each of their five children and their extended families were there, maybe fifty or sixty people in all. I loved those people, and love them still. They listened to one another well, and cared what others had to say. They know how to sit still, and visit with one another. They laughed freely at their own foibles. They sing – there was lots of singing that weekend, old religious songs that I still appreciate hearing. They took God and Jesus seriously, but not so seriously as to scare you away, or make you cringe. I didn't know it at the time, but a PBS moment was taking shape in the midst of it all.

When the weekend was over, we gathered for lunch, after which my parents, my brother and I would load ourselves into the car for an eight-hour drive. We'd get home late that Sunday night, and then on Monday I'd have to enter high school for the first time. To my adolescent mind, it felt like reporting for an execution. Just before we left, everyone stood in a circle to say goodbye, and we sang the Lord Bless You and Keep You to one another. It was, for me, the distillation of the meaning of a blessing, a sacrament. I felt held and loved and embraced in that moment. I carried that song, that feeling, and all it represented with me into the high school the following day. It was a moment in which I felt those many beloved people encouraging me to believe that I could do a hard thing. It was a moment in which I felt whatever it was that was animating them moving from them and into me, encouraging me to believe that I could do a hard thing. And I did. I woke up, and I went to school, still tired, but carrying something within me that I've carried ever since. You can do this hard thing, that something told me.

And so I guess that's what I most want to say to Sabina and to Elsa, to Augie and to Rachael as this school year begins. The Lord Bless You and Keep You. That's what I want to say to all the parents who are concerned about what the year will bring, and to all the teachers, staff, and administrators, all heading into this precarious new year: The Lord Bless You and Keep You. That's what I want to say to all of you, facing down the profound challenges of this moment: The Lord Bless You and Keep You.

You can do this hard thing.

Know that there's something, Someone, who holds and loves you, who walks with you, who surrounds you and strengthens you as you do.

You can do this hard thing.