

LET LEAVE AND LET GO!



**MANNA
&
QUAIL**



EXODUS 16:2-15
PSALM 105:1-6, 37-45
PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30
MATTHEW 20:1-16

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Proper 20; Year A
September 24, 2017

Let Leave and Let Go!

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Have you ever stopped and wondered why we humans do not have eyes in the back of our heads, or why our eyes do not rotate on their axis like a chameleon, or why our heads do not swivel like those of an owl? Of course, you have not thought of those things. That is why you pay me a salary to spend a significant part of my time sitting at a desk every week pondering these great mysteries of the universe, always with the hope springing eternal that a sermon is somehow, somewhere lurking in these mystical musings. Think about it with me for just a moment; if we, in God's inestimable infinite wisdom, had been allowed even one of the above abilities, creating that capacity within us, imagine all the pitfalls in life we might have managed to evade, all the obstacles we could avoid. Think of just how much our sensory awareness would be heightened. Ah, but alas we are not equipped that way, not well endowed with that capacity. Perhaps it is because God did not want us incessantly staring in life's rearview mirror, obsessing on the past, agonizing over failed attempts and mistakes made. But, while we are on the subject, wouldn't x-ray vision have been a nice feature and benefit as well?

I will never forget the day back in the day. The woman I was engaged to marry had leveled me with a bombshell, suddenly dumping me, dropping me like yesterday's news or a rotting piece of fish flesh. Once again, I was on the proverbial rebound, living with the usual sadness and depression,

the overwhelming waves of misery, that sick feeling in your gut that comes with love now lost. There are a lot of women in my rearview mirror, to capture an image we are exploring today. But, I digress; I often do! Well, as luck or fate would have it I began dating someone new. Yet, even so, I knew I was not quite ready to take the plunge and invest my fragile emotional and physical state in another relationship, the fear of an inevitable failure always looming. Folks, I will readily admit that I am not the easiest person with whom to be in that level of relationship! After a trip out of town, this new “girlfriend”, at her insistence, picked me up at the airport, presuming we would automatically go on a date that evening. I was tired and wanted no part of such frivolities and so I declined the invitation, even offering a window into my tortured and tormented soul that she was annoying me, pressuring me, and that it was just too soon to even begin to think about making such profound commitments. This woman knew of my recent breakup. Her response, no better, her reaction was swift and painful, chopping me down like a tree, cutting me to the core. She said, and I quote, “You cannot keep living your life in a rearview mirror!” She did not say it kindly or with compassion, but with condemnation and consternation, completely annoyed and frustrated with me. But hey, isn’t that what guys are supposed to do in relation to women? Once, again, I . . . oh, never mind! Her piercing, poignant words have stuck with me like peanut butter on the roof of a dog’s mouth! Her concise assessment of my plight, her intuitive critique of my being, echoed and reverberated all through my fragility and vulnerability. The painful

truth about the matter was that she was right, dead red, spot on in her clinical diagnosis, her therapeutic analysis, even if she did not play a therapist on TV. Sadly, it took the usual amount of time it takes, whatever that time frame is, for her words to take affect and resonate within me, not to mention my own emotional recovery time, allowing me to move on, to move forward in life and relationship. **Sometimes, letting go is the hardest work we do as human beings. Today, it is not about “live and let live,” but rather it is all about “Let Leave and Let Go!”**

The children of Israel had escaped their oppressors by the collective hairs of their “chinny chin chins,” the “skin of their teeth” we call it. They had been frantically on the run, just outpacing their pursuers, the evil, insidiously marauding Egyptian army, seeking vengeance for an unappeasably angry Pharaoh. These warriors thought they had their adversary boxed in, trapped, bottled up at the Red Sea, only to discover that the fleeing Israelites were a most resourceful crew because of divine backing. The waters parted, according to the legend of the great epic tale, and the Hebrew children marched one and all crossing safely to the other side with nary a drop of water daring to touch one of them. The same could not be said for the foolish Egyptians who naively chose to follow their quarry, their fate quickly sealed when the cascading waters engulfed them in a raging current hell-bent on drowning every last lousy one of them. Looking back at the spectacle, the Israelites suddenly realized that they had

indeed made it out alive, they had somehow survived, that they were now as free as a bird, liberated from the bondage of indenture, hopefully never to be slaves again. Oops, that of course, would not be the case! Anyway, suddenly the world as they had known it, the world as they now knew it had turned on its axis, shifting seismically in every way. In their minds it was all gravy now, nothing but the new horizons of green grass and blue skies awaiting them. Little did they realize, or perhaps they were most painfully, acutely aware, that the really hard work was just beginning as they entered the ever dreaded, ever sought after, ever longed-for wilderness of exile, exile of wilderness. They were now on their own. They would break it or make it! Their adversaries defeated, they could now be their own worst enemy and they frequently would be. Becoming a nation, becoming a people always involves heavy lifting, intensive labor of the highest order, the greatest magnitude. In fact, it is a never-ending process! Just look at our own ongoing American experiment? Like children in the backseat of a car on a long road trip, we all can wistfully ask, "Are we there, yet?" The answer is always a resounding, "No!" Sadly, so it seems, we appear to be going backwards, unfortunately seemingly perpetually, permanently stuck in reverse. Provisions had become scarce; the Israelites' meager rations now a paltry pittance, painfully proportioned. It is hard to carry much, to pack for a journey, when you are literally running for your very lives. Very soon, they ran out of food, the water

ran dry, and the hungry mouths began to run nonstop. When the rumbling sounds of your grumbling stomach crescendos like a not-so-distant drumbeat, becoming increasingly louder, drowning out the promising words of liberation and freedom, pregnant with unlimited hope and the prospects of prosperity, the results can be catastrophically debilitating. All at once, these inspiring words rang hollow, becoming nothing more than the Apostle Paul's "clanging symbols," pious platitudes and porous Pollyanna pronouncements falling on suddenly deaf ears, devoid of any significant meaning. Hunger is a great equalizer! It will do that to you! The people were now ready to rebel, with Moses and Aaron now sporting a huge bullseye, a larger than life target on their backs. After all, it was their fault that the children of Israel had been led into this desolate place to die, their fault that the Israelites were now completely exposed and totally vulnerable, wallowing in self-pity and their most pathetic plight, their pitiful predicament. They were to blame; they were solely responsible for every plight befalling this fickle mass of humanity. Things were getting out of hand quickly.

One of life's guiding principles is a most astute and accurate axiom, that wherever you sit or stand determines what you see. From where the Israelites found themselves, from their perspective they were royally screwed! They saw no way out, no way forward, and they certainly could not go back now despite the urge, the temptation to

do so, a certain death wish awaiting them if they did! The hot heat of the day with no shade to protect them, the lack of food and water, the basic necessities of life, combined to create an untenable scenario, a dire situation with death the only option, the only viable solution, no other alternative a remote possibility. They had lost all resolve, squeezing out every last ounce of hope. And, where there is no hope, what the writer of Isaiah refers to as “vision,” the people always perish. The writer of Exodus expresses their anger and frustration, “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’” I can almost hear them singing Cher’s hit song, *If I Could Turn Back Time!* Cher, I am not! In the book of Numbers (11:5), which describes the same scenario, the writer is even more detailed, more specific in describing the chafing gripe, the constant complaint of this now liberated, but most unappreciative bunch of ingrates. “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.” Never forget the onions and garlic! We ate our fill, having all we wanted! It was a veritable smorgasbord, an all-you-can-eat buffet! So, what if we were forced to work our fingers to the bone from sunup to sunset, backbreaking slave labor

that threatened to kill the body, the mind, the spirit, and the soul all at the same time of a wearied and beaten down populace.

Well, despite the fact that sometimes in the Hebrew scriptures God seems to be obliviously unaware, thus turning a deaf ear, failing to hear the cries of a people, evidently God heard all this complaining loud and clear, a boisterous sound, and graciously, mercifully chooses to respond. God is quoted as saying, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you . . ." You have to wonder if God really wanted to rain down fire and brimstone with all the reactivity a deity could muster. In other texts, the story gets even more absurd, even comical to a degree, as the Israelites suddenly weary of having nothing but heavenly bread, manna to eat, each and every day. Once again in the Book of Numbers the devil is in the details as the Israelites grow tired of eating meal after meal after meal of manna. By God, they wanted some meat, or else! And, for those of us who are carnivores, yes, we get it! Tofu anyone? C'mon man, who throws an asparagus party, a squash barbecue, or tosses a zucchini cook out? What a waste! Who goes to the trouble of grilling broccoli? God gave them the gift of manna and yet, they still complained that they were starving. Sometimes, you just need protein! And, so God, being the ultimate sue chef, the talented and gifted short order cook, the Iron Chef that this deity clearly appears to have been, delivers to them all the quail they could eat. You can't get this level of service at your

local sushi bar or even a Waffle House! And, of course, we would learn that their complaining and griping was far from over when their personal and portable wells went dry. God would hear their critically invoked cries, their sarcastically edgy pleas and would eventually provide water from the rock, but oh the steep price that was paid on that crucible day by the shortsighted and faithless flock for that egregious lack of trust. But, that is another story for another day.

One of the biggest challenges confronting all people, but especially pronounced and indicting of people of faith, is our propensity our longing to live life in the proverbial rearview mirror. It is a coping, a survival mechanism. In fact, and I am going to hazard a guess here, is that it becomes more prominent, more pronounced, more acute as we get older and have a larger, longer sample, an ironically not so broader perspective from which to wax nostalgic. How many times have we heard people claim to long for what were mythologically called the “good old days?” Any time we see a documentary on the life and times of the Kennedys, that period in history is often referred to as having Camelot capacity. We often hear people use the image of Camelot as a description of days of wine and roses, another image in its own right of grandiosely romanticized times, leaning heavily into revisionist history. It is only human nature to do so and it is only a natural response when times seem extremely or

excessively troubling or anxiety driven, fear producing. Days like today, perhaps? What we forget through our rose colored rearview lenses is the amazing human capacity to forget the most negative images of history, put them on a shelf as if to avoid or ignore the painful realities that intervene in the midst of our lives on occasion. It really is a defense mechanism providing for a convenient tool allowing us to mask our fears and anxiety, allowing and enabling our ability to move forward during the most challenging or complicated, the most complex or troubling of circumstances. No, we never forget the tough times nor should we ever forget them, but we know that if we are not able to process them, to compartmentalize or categorize them, to file them away, deflating them, vainly seeking to disempower them so that they can no longer hurt us, debilitate, or defeat us in any way imaginable, they will haunt our every thought, our every move. When we are unable to do so, they remain never far off our radar, always threatening to undo us. What cliché is it that we are prone to recite? “Tough times do not last; tough people do!” Life is short and we know full well we can never allow the slings and arrows of life’s misfortunes to get the best or even the better of us. Our job is to learn from the history that has helped shape and mold us, that has helped define us, making us who we are in real time, while being wary to not necessarily replicate the past. All of us know full well that history, unfortunately often repeats itself.

This phenomenon does not only apply to our individual lives, our daily personal triumphs and struggles, but is equally relevant in terms of our corporate capacity, our collective groupings that are the basic DNA of any organization or institution, of course, including, and I might add for emphasis, especially among churches and denominations. As we anticipate celebrating 500 years of Reformation history this October, we acknowledge a golden opportunity to look back with much pride as we honor the history and heritage, the great legacy begun by those bold and courageous reformers who stood in the gap, calling into question the abuses and evils of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. Folks, if we truly believe that God is still speaking, if we truly believe in a holy and still speaking Spirit, then we are always a people of process, an evolutionary beloved faith community always marching into the future, as unknown and even scary as it sometimes seems to be. Theologically, we are a people who believe in, lean into continuing revelation. We strive to live into the ancient mantra of the Reformation, "The Church reformed, always reforming!" We proudly honor the past and the legacy of those who have gone before, but that was their day and their time bound perspective. All creedal statements, the ancient creeds, all dogma and doctrine are frozen in time, having a very short shelf life. We should never assume for a nanosecond that God, the great transcendent awe inspiring and inspiriting mystery of the universe does not want us, expect us, demand us to continue to grow, evolving in all matters of faith and practice, always open to new discoveries, the revelations that only come from the Divine.

It was the Apostle Paul who called the early converts who established churches in his mission fields to move from a diet of milk to meat, always learning, always growing, always developing a new sense of self-awareness spawned within the arena of a ravenous religious curiosity. The scriptures, the creeds, the dogma and doctrine produced through theological dialogue and discourse, all of it should have been designed, intended to become building blocks on which we hew our own faith, carved and crafted out of the litmus tests steeling our experiences, our uniquely individualized perspective of belief. We know it did not turn out that way and so now, out of contemporary necessity, we are forced to bust loose and are indeed busting loose, the Church and its weighty tradition always dripping with the fear of hell and God's vengeance kicking and screaming the whole way, not going quietly into that dark night where so much of the guilt and judgment it breeds belongs. It will not ever go away quietly, but go away much of it must. One size never fits all! The only thing ever intended to be set in stone is the cornerstone of our faith, even Christ Jesus our teacher and mentor, our greatest reformer, the one who is the essence of "wasteful" love, of goodness and grace whom we can boldly and proudly declare with the utmost conviction as Savior and Lord because of the loving way of life he calls us, leads us, and empowers us to embrace and embody.

Someone, I have no idea who it was, once opined that these are the best days of our lives," and I think that is indeed the truth. For as

others have noted, especially around here in these parts, every day in which we are upright and vertical is a good day! Can I get an “Amen?” I concur with those sentiments. As hard as it is to believe on occasion, as difficult a pill as it is to swallow for some, I dare to boldly suggest that all of this is true for us as the SouthShore United Church of Christ. This is our time for these are days of incredible opportunity placed before us unlike any that we have known before. And, as I like to say, “Every opportunity is an opportunity!” Yes, while it is true that we have fewer members and much less money, we have an amazing opportunity before us because of an intentionally emerging, evolving sense of identity, an ethos defined by a grasp of a clearly articulated purpose, a certain gravitas, that will enable us to seize a new day, a day characterized by, driven by a vibrant and vital, a relational and relevant beloved faith community, embodying a clarity of zeal unlike anything ever experienced before on these sacred grounds. The four images I just presented to you—vibrant and vital, relational and relevant—are the new watchwords, buzzwords in reality, describing churches that are growing and expanding in the many and varied ways that ecclesial systems must do if they are to remain on the radar of what is now a vastly different reality, a completely altered landscape unlike anything from any bygone era, if they are to have any impact on the postmodern, 21st century world in which all of us have been thrust and now live and move and have our being. Folks, the sobering truth is there are no

other options available. Every church, in order to survive, keeping alive the hope to even thrive, to have even a modicum chance of success, must, through much discernment, discover its niche, embrace its piece of the pie, seize its part and parcel of the puzzle. It is the nature of ecclesiology, the Church, today!

Despite many obstacles, many impediments, powers, and principalities intent on holding us back, look at how far we have come in a very short time. We have changed the name of the congregation to reflect our regional outlook and outreach. We have changed the name of our social hall to reflect our long-standing tradition as radically inclusive, “extravagantly welcoming,” and expansively hospitable. We have reaffirmed our covenantal denominational relationship with the United Church of Christ. We are in process toward a decision on Open and Affirming. We are in process of honing a vision and a mission statement that no longer cautiously, timidly hides our congregational claims and convictions, encouraging us to cower under a bushel while projecting a rather generic, innocuously nebulous image, but rather with much energy and excitement buying into a narrative that portrays a confident quality, proudly flying with crystal clarity and conviction our congregational flag, boldly daring to declare who we are and what we are about as we seek fellow travelers, seekers who are a bit more serendipitous in their outlook, more inclined to be intellectually curious, intellectually challenging mind. We seek to be an ecclesial, theological bridge between

the ancient tradition of the past and the new revelations from a holy and still speaking God leading us in the present and always moving us toward a bright and prosperous future. We seek to tug at the heart, while challenging the mind, always mindful that so much of our religious life, our spiritual discipline is dependent on the emotions for its very life blood, all the while seeking to challenge and stimulate the mind, if even managing to remotely scratch the surface as we seek to answer, or at least address the questions of deepest mystery that both stimulate and confound, and sometimes even haunt the human creature. And, the beauty of all of this is that we are simply, with greater clarity and conviction, seizing the mandates, the principles that were long established bedrock convictions at this church's founding. We are not creating something new even though we are! All we are doing is merely dusting off, bringing out of mothballs, hopefully not out of retirement, the long-held principles articulated at this church's founding. We are fully embracing the wonderful propaganda of this church's past!

As we enter what is always seen and understood as a new season of church life, if you are still a little hesitant, a little unsure, wavering in any way whatsoever, as the Senior Minister of this blessed congregation, I challenge you to get on board the SouthShore train. Yes, it has left the station, but with a little effort and a head of steam you can still climb aboard as together we build this ship. This bandwagon is big enough for all comers and goers! How is that for

mixing some transportation metaphors? We have everything we need here to be all that God is calling us to be because we have you and even me. As your Pastor, I have never been more jazzed, more pumped, revved up about all our possibilities. As George W. Bush once astutely observed, "The past is over!" We can all get caught up in staring down memory lane, obsessing on any and every shiny object, every "pretty" sparkling in the rearview mirror captivating us, capturing our attention, but never our imagination, mesmerizing us in every shallow, hollow way, or we can face our future like a flint, steadfastly steeling ourselves, committed to wherever and whatever the still speaking Spirit of God is leading, wandering, and wondering just like those wilderness Exodus exiles of old. Wow, what an adventure in might be! Let these be days of mystery and wonder; allow these salad days, days of Camelot, of wine and roses to be our guide, illuminating our bright pathway. They can and will be if we declare it so, allowing them to be. This is our time! So, let leave and let go and yes, cliché time here, let God!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, sustains, and is the God of all our yesterdays, todays, and tomorrows. Amen and amen.

Timothy W. Shirley
SouthShore United Church of Christ
Sun City Center, Florida 33573
© September 24, 2017

