

Horses on Parade XVII

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
September 10, 2017 (Rally Day)
Exodus 12:1-14

As we gather, I'd invite us into a period of silence: Perhaps to reflect on those impacted by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, or a devastating earthquake in Mexico. Perhaps to reflect on the events in Charlottesville and elsewhere this summer, and their meaning. Perhaps to reflect on the events in Washington and New York City and Shanksville, Pennsylvania sixteen years and a day ago, and how our world was so deeply impacted. Reflect on those things, and others, as the Spirit leads you, your response and our response, as we begin a new year together...

...Help us to remember, O God. Help us to dance with those who celebrate and weep with those who mourn. Help us to act, now, with faith and hope, in the places your Spirit calls us. Help us to hear your word anew, in deep ways, and so to be transformed, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sunday school is back! Welcome back choir! A big Rally Day party on the East Avenue lawn, thanks to the Congregational Fellowship Committee and our wonderful sextons. Welcome back to those who have been away and welcome now to those who may be new to us. There are many moving parts to this day, as there will be to this year. We'd have it no other way.

I will attempt this morning to interweave three themes, incompletely to be sure, but as a way of getting us started.

1. Rally Day and Horses on Parade,
2. Celebrating the 190th anniversary of Third Presbyterian Church, and
3. A Year of Stewardship.

The familiar story of the first Passover, from the Book of Exodus, will be our entry point. It is exceedingly prescribed and extraordinarily solemn. It should be. Jonathan Sacks, the retired Chief Rabbi of London, writes that "Pesach (Passover) is the oldest and most transformative story of hope ever told. It tells of how an otherwise undistinguished group of slaves found their

way to freedom from the greatest and longest-lived empire of their time, indeed of any time. It tells the revolutionary story of how the supreme Power intervened in history to liberate the supremely powerless. It is a story of the defeat of probability by the force of possibility..."

So while the details matter, and matter a great deal, what seems to matter more is the interpretation at the end of the narrative. We hear that "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance."

Remembrance. Celebrate. Generations. That is what we do every Sunday; those commitments are punctuated on this day when we gather from the places we've been and re-connect to this place, its vision and ministry and the faith that undergirds it all.

We gather, on this Rally Day/Horses on Parade Sunday, as this congregation, Third Presbyterian Church, begins marking its 190th anniversary. 190 years ago, our Third Church forebears began an experiment at the corner of North Clinton Avenue and Main Street, near where the new Democrat and Chronicle building is located. No history lecture today, and, really, no history lectures this year. We *will* use certain moments in our history to help us remember, and give thanks, and look ahead to our next 190 years.

That fits the Passover narrative as well. Barry Morgan, the retired Archbishop of Wales who graced our pulpit last Sunday, spoke of the Exodus and Passover. "The Passover story," he said, "wasn't told as a past event, but as a present event...The story is not just about...ancestors, but a story about God's continued rescue of (God's) people."

Rabbi Sacks says something similar: "It is the story more than a hundred generations of our ancestors handed on to their children, and they to theirs. As we do likewise, millennia later, we know what it is to be the people of history, guardians of a narrative not engraved in hieroglyphics on the walls of a monumental building but carried in the minds of living, breathing human beings who, for longer than any other have kept faith with the future and the past, bearing witness to the power of the human spirit when it opens itself to a greater power, beckoning us to a world of freedom, responsibility and human dignity."

In that sense, our sacrament of the Lord's Supper, communion, echoes that vision. When we gather at the table, as we will do this morning, we do so not as a memorial service of a long ago moment, but as an ongoing meal, in the company of all those who have gone before us, shared with the living Christ, whose Spirit abides with us still.

As we celebrate 190 years over these next months, we will think of those saints, gathered at Clinton and Main, and then at Temple Street, and now at Meigs Street and East Avenue, the saints, living, breathing brick and mortar, and *actual* brick and mortar, this church as a way station and launching pad for worship and learning and service, for justice and reconciliation and love.

190 years. Past as prelude, a song of our God in ages past *and* our hope for years to come, what we will hand on to our children and all the generations to follow.

Which allows us to pivot to our Year of Stewardship. In a sense, Passover is a stewardship story, the grateful gathering of abundant gifts in the community of faith and joyfully offering them back to God.

Stewardship is a concept that we will unpack together over the coming months, but perhaps today we can share some initial affirmations...

NANCY WATSON

Stewardship.

It is a verb.

It is doing;

learning;

listening;

feeling ...

all tangled together

because they can't be separated.

Doing is giving, healing, building, planting, feeding, holding, comforting.

But I can't do it without learning new ways of seeing and understanding.

I need new ideas to show me the way

to do what needs to be done.

I need new eyes

to see what needs to be done.

I need new ideas

to show me what will help.

I need to stretch my mind

to understand new ways to be.

*So stewardship is growing and learning.
Searching for new ways to understand
To walk a mile in the shoes of "another."
And find new insight into the reality of the "other."
And use that to find new ways to help.*

*It is a quest
To grow
And learn and see
And be.*

KATIE OREM

When you hear the word stewardship, perhaps you immediately think of pledging. At Third Church, we have a Stewardship Committee that runs the stewardship campaign. The committee works to inspire us to pledge as much as we are able to keep this wonderful place going.

For me, stewardship is about more than pledging. It is about responsibility and honoring God. Stewardship is a way of being in the world and with the church. It is doing the best we can with what we have, and always striving to know more, so we can do better. It is taking care of our church and community so that future generations have some and what we have now, and hopefully something better.

Each day we are given opportunities for stewardship. Perhaps you are a teacher and you nurture other people's children all day. Perhaps you work in business and make decisions that impact our economy and the environment. Or maybe you are a lawyer and you work for justice. Or maybe you work in service positions that maintain and repair people and things. Everything we do comes with the opportunity for stewardship: teachers helping children to be their best selves and to care for one another and our city, business people considering the economy and wellbeing of people as they work to make money, lawyers taking what they see in the courts and working for justice, service people making daily interactions kind and helpful because you never know the inner struggles of the people you are serving.

We have all been given the opportunity to live on this amazing earth and worship together at this incredible church. We have an abundance of riches, but not always an abundance of wealth. Our riches and wealth are gifts from God. Stewardship requires us to determine what riches and means we have, and to share them with the church and community so that our children's

children will be able to stand in this room with future congregations and feel the love God has for us.

GREGG HAMBURGER

Walter Brueggemann is an important figure in modern Progressive Christianity, who is both an influential Old Testament scholar and a theologian. In his extensive writings Brueggemann argues that the church must present a counter-narrative to the dominant forces of consumerism, militarism, and nationalism. He addresses consumerism, asserting that the conflict—between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity—is the defining problem confronting us in this era. It is a conflict between the good news of God’s abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity—which, in turn, makes us greedy, mean, and unneighborly. Allow me to insert here that I don’t know any Third Churcher who is greedy, mean, or unneighborly!

Brueggemann helps my thinking around the topic of stewardship coalesce. As he observes, our consumer culture tells us not to care about anyone but ourselves. He adds: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if liberal and conservative churchpeople, who love to quarrel with each other, came to a common realization that the real issue confronting us is whether the news of God’s abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity?”

We all should, I believe, as thoughtful members of this congregation, give financially to the ministries of this church as generously as befits our means. We are part of an institution doing good and seeking to do ever more good in this community and in the larger world. We all want Third Church to more than survive—we want it to thrive!

For this to happen we must act as true stewards, both through our dollar contributions, and in what abundance we as talented, thoughtful individuals can provide through action. We need to be involved. So my message today is: do whatever you can. Be a good steward of the abundance we share—share not only whatever monetary resources are available to you, but share also your own personal abundance of energy, and talent, and time. If these things are your habit, the Lord’s blessings to you; and please continue. If not, what better time than this Year of Stewardship to become involved in a multifaceted way?

We will spend these coming months exploring what Nancy, Katie and Gregg have articulated so well, our shared and many-faceted call as stewards, as caretakers of and investors in every good gift God has given us.

In her beautiful poem “The Summer Day,” Mary Oliver asks: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” That is a stewardship question. What do we stewards plan to do with our lives, our wild and precious lives, and every other abundant gift that God gives us – our time, our energy, our vision, our relationships, our love, our faith, our 190 years of history, and yes, absolutely, our money? What do we plan to do?

Let us pray. God, whose giving knows no ending...Gifted by You, we turn to You,/ Offering up ourselves in praise:/Thankful song shall rise forever,/Gracious donor of our days. Amen.