

## Deuteronomy 26:1-15

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, <sup>2</sup>you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. <sup>3</sup>You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." <sup>4</sup>When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, <sup>5</sup>you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. <sup>6</sup>When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup>we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup>The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; <sup>9</sup>and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. <sup>11</sup>Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

<sup>12</sup>When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns, <sup>13</sup>then you shall say before the LORD your God: "I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows, in accordance with your entire commandment that you commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of your commandments: <sup>14</sup>I have not eaten of it while in mourning; I have not removed any of it while I was unclean; and I have not offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the LORD my God, doing just as you commanded me. <sup>15</sup>Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our ancestors—a land flowing with milk and honey."

## Matthew 28:16-20

### The Commissioning of the Disciples

<sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

**September 9, 2018**

**Matthew 28:16-20; Deuteronomy 25:1-15**

**“Preparing People to Leave Us”**

**Kerra Becker English**

If you have already read this month’s newsletter, you will know about one of the motivational posters I had in my room as a kid. Some time in the late 70’s or early 80’s it was a popular slogan, “If you love something, set it free. If it comes back to you, it is yours. If not, it never was.” I couldn’t tell you the exact picture it had on it – but likely it was either a soaring seabird, or the wild ponies of Chincoteague – demonstrating the very essence of wildness and freedom – but also the elusiveness of desperately wanting those wild things to be my friends.

I like that the slogan plays with two important themes when it comes to love – freedom and belonging. Dr. Murray Bowen, who is known for studying and developing a theory of how families and their related social systems work together describes these two aspects of love as our basic life forces – individuality and togetherness. According to Bowen, “The togetherness force assumes responsibility for the happiness, comfort and well being of others, while a person differentiating a self (or as I would call it – a person maintaining his or her individual freedom) “assumes responsibility for one’s own happiness, and comfort and well-being.” Seeking freedom to be oneself while also seeking to be close to others is something that Bowen observed most people in intimate relationships doing – whether it was working out successfully, or not.

We who belong to this church family are also practitioners of these basic life forces. And it makes sense to note that, at church too, we need both freedom and belonging. Unfortunately, as denominational numbers seem to be in decline, and smaller churches are told they should be

scared as to how they are going to make it just one more generation, the dominating question in Presbyterian circles seems to be, “How do we GET more people?” Do YOU sense the fear in that question? I certainly do. We have couched it in terms of Jesus’ last request. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, but then we shrink that message to believing that Jesus meant we might be failing if we don’t go out and get the appropriate market share of Presbyterians. We skew what Jesus was saying when we do that, and when we set ourselves up for the sole purpose of GETTING new people. We forget about the kind of freedom Jesus was offering – because his sense of freedom in God was huge. Remember that Jesus gave the rich young ruler a choice, and then let him go away grieving that he couldn’t choose both his riches and being a disciple.

The gospel writer Matthew was willing to tell us something we often overlook in this familiar text. Even as Jesus was speaking his final words in front of his closest friends, having returned from death on a cross, they both believed and doubted, and the original language doesn’t make it clear if they were in internal conflict or if some were with him all the way, and others were being skeptical. What is clear is that they weren’t sure what they were getting themselves into – except that it would be an educational endeavor. *Take on students*, Jesus tells them, *all kinds of students, from every background imaginable, and don’t be afraid to teach them what I have taught you about love, about justice, about mercy, and then hold their feet to the fire for accountability to those teachings. I have received authority*, Jesus says, *so now I give you that authority to let people know what their choices are. You are to welcome those who are drawn to this ministry by baptizing them. Tell them that they belong to God, and that I will be present with them until the very end of time. The Holy Spirit will guide you into that truth.* That’s what I hear Jesus saying in this text! Love all kinds of people – so that you will set them free.

You see, that's a different model of church. I say, if you love God's people, maybe it's our job then, to free them as well. But instead of setting people loose in the world to do God's work, we have chosen this un-Jesus-y path of turning them into diehard members of a religious organization. Perhaps it's not the worst thing in the world – but I think it needs a bit of adjustment for our time and age so that folks don't feel so trapped by church – which is often what non-church going people say about how the church reacts to them. They want to know God; they just don't want the trappings of religion, and religious folks have made it clear that church is the only way to get to an understanding of who God is.

So how might we do that? Instead of working to GET people, how might we work on LOVING people? Tenderly? Openly? So that they are drawn into a sense of belonging rather than feeling in some way coerced? I like considering this question. It reminds me of Parker Palmer's description of the soul as being like a wild deer. If you try to approach a wild deer too quickly or noisily, it will turn tail and run in the opposite direction. To approach a wild deer takes quiet, compassion, and according to my mother's plan, a daily bag of apples thrown off the back porch. Yes, she has coaxed the wild deer into spending time with her nearly every evening. But the soul is like that – timid, and needs to be approached with caution.

Here, I may be pushing some sayings and metaphors farther than I should. And yet, I find that the more ancient goal of religion isn't so aligned with the newfangled goal of measuring attendance and the balance sheet. No, the ancient goal of religion is connection with the divine, and you can't coerce a relationship with God, not even with a delicious bag of apples. Connection with God comes from loving others well, assuming some responsibility for their happiness, comfort, and well-being, while at the same time honoring each individual's own happiness, comfort, and well-being. In doing so, we stretch the capacities of love and belonging,

and make room for people to come to their own decisions about how they will offer their own thanks and praise to God.

When we love people like this we set them free. Its not easy to let them go either. We want sometimes to hold them tight. It's hard for us to feel that sense of belonging with one another and still let them go their own path. Those of you who are empty nest parents, or who have ever had a good friend move to another city – you know. In love, you want to hold them tight, but that's not good parenting, it's more of a suffocating friendship. The church is no different. In what we do – all that we do – we are preparing people to leave us.

That sounds strange, and in the ultimate, end times of life kind of situation, we know this is true. A strong faith may be the absolute best preparation for the time when we will be called upon to leave this earth in death and enter the unknown. But people have these kinds of deaths to one thing to start something new all the time. Liz Campbell's last Sunday with us is today before she moves to Levittown, New York. Karen Dorgan moved just a few months ago and takes her church family with her to Dauphin Island as we have prayed for her safe keeping during the most recent bad weather there. We nurture people in this community who are often in transition – between jobs, or from working into retirement. When their lives change, a move sometimes comes with that. But the best that we can do is know that we walked with them well while they were here.

Another example is our intern program. Caitlin is now the 14<sup>th</sup> intern (hopefully I've counted right) that you have nurtured in the past, what?, 10 years or so of your ministry. Each one offers you a new beginning, a time of learning and growing together, and then what 9 months from now will feel like such a short time, we will say goodbye. It's been a good practice. We wouldn't be doing our job as a teaching church if they were all still sticking around. Our job

is to absolutely prepare them to leave us, to love them in such a way that they will go from being student pastors, to being pastors on their own. That's a gift, a real gift. You love them. You set them free.

And I could take example after example in stories from just about every person in this congregation. You could tell me multiple stories of how Ashland Presbyterian Church took you, prepared you, and sent you out to be a disciple of Christ to probably all nations. It doesn't mean that you have to follow Flo to her missionary post in the Congo or go fishing with Roger in Canada. It means that you allow who you are becoming in this place, to follow you into whatever places you find yourself in. If I am doing my job, if we are doing our job as a church, you are being freed to do God's work wherever you find yourself.

That's why I also read the Deuteronomy text today. It's a text about giving out of gratitude from your first fruits. Perhaps it doesn't seem the most relevant, and yet, it reminds us to be thankful in our current situation, knowing that God called our ancestors Abraham and Sarah to be on the move. God brought the Israelites out of slavery. God sets us free, but in doing so, sometimes we have to pick up from where we are and get moving to where God wants us to be.

To live into this truth is to know that someone's 3 times coming to Ashland may be exactly what they needed to hear and grow into the next step of life. It means that we are patient with those whose family circumstance – young kids or the health problems of older age – makes their attendance at worship a “when they are able” kind of thing. It means that people who show up at Christmas and Easter are absolutely every bit as valuable, every bit as loved, every bit as treasured and supported as the stalwart members who are here week in and week out. It's not exactly what many of us grew up with as the expectations of church membership. And yet, it is

honest, and true, and loving, and kind, and gets us out of the rut of “getting” people and into the habit of loving people where they are.

I don't know who the next person will be who leaves us. Yes, I'm sad – every time – even when I know it's coming. Preparing people to leave us takes an emotional maturity that is different from being mad because we thought they were going to be around forever. It means that church is always changing, even small churches that we expect to stay the same. But I think both of these scriptural responses are accurate. Jesus tells us to teach love and tell people they belong. The law in Deuteronomy tells us to be grateful because God has guided us through every change and every move. Know that, whatever your circumstance, I love you. Whatever you need right at this moment, God loves you. And you are free to be who you are. And you belong. Amen.