

“Shaping Our Future”
October 12, 2025

Exodus 14:10-18
Philippians 2:12-13

October always brings good things to our congregation. Last Sunday we remembered our connections with Christians around the world during World Communion Sunday. Our Progressive Dinner is usually in October, as it was this year. At the end of the month, we will remember our Protestant roots on Reformation Sunday. And, as John Fieselmann told us last week and Nathan reminded us today, we are in the middle of our Stewardship Campaign.

While some ministers and congregations dread this season, I do not. Those who have been around here for any length of time know that I look forward to preaching about stewardship. The only thing I enjoy more than preaching to raise money for the realm of God is seeing the results when our congregation spends that money for the realm of God: the hungry are fed, the homeless are sheltered, refugees are welcomed, children are nurtured in faith, beautiful music echoes through this room, university students find a spiritual home while they study here.

I'm always glad when stewardship season arrives. And the ongoing generosity of this congregation suggests that you are as well. You know that, in the challenges of this year especially, the work and witness of Congregational UCC is as important as it has ever been. Our generous sharing of our many gifts will give shape to our future.

To help as we consider our giving and our acting, I want to start with that great story from the Book of Exodus, which is filled with encouragement.

It reminds us that we are not the first to know threats and difficulties.

Look. The Hebrew people are up against the waters of the Red Sea as the chariots of Pharaoh close in on them.

Many people know this story—from Sunday School and sermons and the silver screen we have learned of Moses bringing the Hebrew people out of bondage. Pharaoh, of course, was not pleased and once he recovered from those plagues, he set out to bring his escaped captives back.

If you don't know this story, you heard this morning how it ends: Moses stretches out his hand over the sea, the waters are divided, and the Israelites walk through the sea on dry ground. Then, as Miriam, the sister of Moses, sang in the earliest song recorded in scripture: “God triumphed gloriously; horse and rider God has thrown into the sea.”

This is good to know as we think about this story, because that outcome was not guaranteed. No outcome is. The future is unknown and undermined.

This story tells us about God's power and God's might.

Perhaps even more importantly, it also tells us about our own ability to act and the resources that we have.

There is something unusual here. Something unexpected—which is often the case in God’s dealings with human beings. And we can easily miss it in a quick reading.

The Hebrew people stand on the shoreline and Pharaoh draws near. Clearly seeing what’s coming, they bitterly ask Moses: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?”

Then, as Moses seeks to reassure the people, the LORD God says to Moses: “Why do you cry out to me?”

“Why do you cry out to me?”

Maybe because the situation is so desperate. Maybe because, death and fear and the unknown press in on the Hebrew people in the way that death and fear and the unknown are pressing in on us in these days.

We might expect God to reassure Moses and the people. We might expect *God* to do something dramatic. Instead, we hear: “Why do you cry out to me?”

Even biblical scholars puzzle over God’s disturbing question. One calls it “odd.” It must be, others suggest, that those words originally belonged somewhere else in the story. Perhaps they have been misplaced.

But I wonder. What if those are just the words that Moses and a desperate people needed to hear?

What if those are just the words that *we* need to hear in these days?

These words contain the encouraging suggestion that Moses has power, that the people have power—the ability to act. From that power, they will be able to make a way through and move forward.

Instead of taking over, God reminds Moses of the resources he has: “Lift up your staff. Stretch out *your* hand. That will be enough for, as this version of the story tells it, *Moses* to divide the sea to create a path of dry land. Make use of what you have and you will change your circumstances; you will change history.

And that, of course is the quick definition of stewardship: the wise use of all that we have been entrusted with, all of our resources.

Why do you cry out to me? Summon your resources, your courage, your faith, your strength, your hope, your love and shape your future.

Do not wait for God or cry out to God.

Instead hear what God says to Moses and the people: “Go forward.” “Move on.”

Make a way. Make a way out of no way.

These are not the words that we would expect. Or at least they are not the words I expect.

I expect God to say: “Walk on this road that I have made. Go along this path that I will show you.”

In such cases the task for us seems to be to find and follow. Difficult as the way might be, the way is already there.

But as we listen carefully to the God who speaks to Moses, the God who speaks through the prophets in our current days of uncertainty, we might hear a new reality: the road is not there. We stand on the edge of a perilous and churning sea.

But take heart!

Along with that disturbing, challenging reality, we hear a new calling: Create a new way where there is no way. Make a path through the perilous and churning sea before us.

In faith, we glimpse the reality that human action and God’s actions are connected, intertwined. We are co-creators with God, the followers of Jesus who are doing new things, creating a new world, shaping our future.

So, we take it to heart when, Paul tells the Philippian Christians and tells us: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” Yes, that can cause us some consternation. Our actions have consequences, so we need to be careful and mindful and prayerful about the work that we do. But we also believe that, as Paul reminds us, “it is God who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.”

We each have our own work to do. Together as a congregation we have our larger work as well. And in all our work, God is working with us, seeking to do a greater work of love.

As liberal Protestants we faithfully bring the good news of God’s love *to* the world rather than being shaped into the world’s mold.

This year our Stewardship Board invites each of us and all of us to share our gifts to shape the future.

On recent Sundays, Chuck Connerly has been leading the adult education group in a discussion of Timothy Snyder’s little book, *On Tyranny*. In this book Snyder offers twenty lessons from the twentieth century that are important for us in these days as troops show up in cities, as not the worst of the worst but ordinary men and women and children are assaulted by masked ICE agents, as our government seeks to push universities to make dramatic changes in exchange for preferential treatment for federal funding, as each day another step is taken to convert the United States from a democracy governed by the rule of law to an authoritarian state governed by force, censorship, and personal favor.

Among the twenty is number 15: Contribute to good causes.

Snyder says that “one element of freedom is the choice of associates, and one defense of freedom is the activity of groups to sustain their members. In the twentieth century, all the major enemies of freedom were hostile to non-governmental organizations, charities, and the like.” We can add churches to that list.

So, Snyder suggests: “Be active in organizations that express your own view of life. Pick a charity or two and set up autopay. Then will have made a free choice that supports civil society and helps others to do good.”

You probably didn’t think about this as the ushers went through the congregation this morning, but your giving you are defending freedom. You are shaping the future.

Whether you give through autopay, or online, or the old-fashioned way of putting an envelope in the offering plate, your regular and generous giving is one way that you are helping to maintain a civil society in uncivil times.

We are stewards of abundant resources that we can draw upon especially in these challenging times. We are called, like Moses, to use what we have, to take up our staffs and stretch out our hands.

What new path through the sea of corruption and greed do we need to make so that all people might have access to the still abundant resources of our nation and our world?

What new path through the sea of hatred and injustice do we need to make so that the very image of God in each person is given the full respect and freedom it deserves?

What new path through the sea of ineffective and incompetent leadership do we need to make so that our government might be at the service of those who are governed—promoting the public health, alleviating some of the great economic pain that leaving so many people hungry and homeless and the rest of us worried about the future in ways we never imagined we would be?

Let your giving be part of the new and wonderful things that, by the grace of God, we might bring into the world.

Do not cry to God.

Look at all that you have received from God.

Share your gifts to shape our future.