

“Over the Hill?”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

February 28, 2021 – Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

Some things get better with age. Some things gain value with age.

Just over a year ago, a bottle of Scotch whiskey that was distilled in 1926 and was aged for 60 years in an oak cask was sold at auction. It sold for 1.9 million dollars, or about 120,000 dollars per pour.

Vincent Van Gogh, in his lifetime, produced about 900 paintings, but he was not a very successful painter, commercially speaking, at the time. In fact, he only sold a couple of his own works, and many of his paintings he traded away for food; he gave away others in exchange for art supplies. Today, the most valuable of Van Gogh's paintings is his Portrait of Dr. Gachet, and it is worth well over 150 million dollars.

And some things not only become more valuable over time, some things require time to be of any value or to be good at all. Think about so many wonderful fermented or cured foods like cheese, salami, and chocolate. Some of these things are completely unpalatable or unsafe to eat without being properly aged.

In today's story from Genesis, we read of a couple of our spiritual ancestors that we're not spring chickens, but they were ripened to just the right age for the assignment that God had given to them.

Sarah and Abraham received in their 90s a message from God that they would bring forth on the planet a great nation. And who would believe that? They were in their 90s. Weren't they over the hill? Well, in God's eyes, no; they were not over the hill. In fact, they were aged just right, perfectly matured and ready to begin this new assignment in their life's journey.

To symbolize that new assignment, God gave them new names. Abram, which means exalted ancestor, was renamed Abraham, meaning the ancestor of a multitude. Sarai was renamed Sarah, both meaning princess. Indeed, she would be the ancestor to royalty. Well, Abraham and Sarah went from being barren to being blessed into being a blessing for all the world's peoples at the age of 90.

And here we are today on our Lenten journey as a church that is in its 292nd year of its journey as a congregation. And we're part of a religious tradition that goes back 2000 years, which came out of a religious tradition in ancient Israel that goes back to the time of Abraham, maybe 4000 years ago (if you are in our confirmation class, you will learn later today in our lesson all about that story of the history of our faith and our own tradition in the United Church of Christ). We have been around for a long time. But are we over the hill? I do not believe so. I

believe that we are like Abraham and Sarah and their 90s were just getting started and that great things will come from us.

We may question or wonder if God is doing something in our midst or if we are over the hill if we look at the limited number of people in this room right now and consider that the Congregational churches in New England used to be at the center of every town's activity, and, in fact, everyone in every town supported the church in the form of taxation. Over the years, the Congregational churches like ours have shrunk in size and we've had diminishing amount of influence in our towns.

Not only that, we see the diminishing influence of other Christian traditions like ours throughout New England and around the country. Right here in Stoneham, with the closing of the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church in just the last couple of years, our congregation is now the last progressive Christian church in town. There is another mainline congregation in the American Baptist Church, but they are an Evangelical congregation, and so we really are last church in Stoneham that maintains a progressive Christian faith tradition. We are in a town of 23,000 people, and St. Pat's Catholic Church, up the road claims 16,000 of those! I know some of you are very good with numbers and know that that's about 70 percent of our town. And so we can see how the religious traditions have really changed over the years here in old New England.

And here in new New England, we find ourselves gathered in a sanctuary with much less people than we would have had when this room was built in 1840. But even with our diminishing numbers, I don't believe that our church is over the hill at all. I think our audience has just become more selective, and like a rare, old Scotch, grows in value as it gets older. I think our congregation also is just now getting properly matured. It's just the right time for some new amazing work of God to be done in our church and in our community.

I think the commitment that this church has made in recent years to better love our neighbors and ourselves through becoming opening and affirming, through better loving our planet by sticking a bunch of solar panels on the roof, and by doing all that we do to feed people in our community just shows that we truly are trying to change and to grow constantly to become a greater blessing to ourselves and the world around us. And I don't believe that we're done doing that. We are not over the hill, but are still growing and changing, and it's just the right time for some new amazing work of God to happen in this place and through those of us who are gathered here and those of us who are gathered online.

We are called to bear some kind of new cross. But what is it that we are called to do? Well, we're called to carry the burden to serve God and others selflessly and in some new way, and that never involves taking from over people (although it was probably a lot easier for us to function as a church and to

manage our budget when the town was taxed to support the church). We are not here because we're forced to be here. Rather, we choose to be here of our own volition. And we choose to serve people not to gain greater power over them again or to coerce people into seeing things our way, but simply because we love people and want to give to them.

This is exactly why in our reading from the gospel lesson of Mark, Peter was rebuked by Jesus. In fact, he gave them a harsh new name, Satan, which means adversary. Well, Jesus kept talking about dying on the cross and giving to others and suffering, and Peter didn't like that because Peter had plans that did not involve suffering or sacrifice. Peter's plans involved the glory of Jesus, with him setting up a new literal kingdom where he would reign over the people of the world and where his disciples, chief among them Peter, would gain positions of power and influence over others. And so Jesus rebuked Peter and explained that Jesus was to establish a spiritual kingdom, a spiritual realm, a *kingdom* really, where people are fellows with one another rather than a realm where some people have coercive power over others and exert their influence to take from others. This realm of God on earth is what Jesus came to usher in, and this realm is marked by selfless love and sacrificial service.

So, friends, we should not lament our decline in membership and influence in our town, but we should be hopeful and recognize what an opportunity we have to have a new and

broader impact in our community, even in this covid-time, when so many of us are not able to gather together in person. In fact, most of us are gathering online this morning.

Especially in this covid-time, there are many new needs and things that we can be doing to better serve our community. We've seen in the last year an increase in the need for food among the people of this town. And if you read your recently sent newsletter, which of course you already did, you know that the amount of food that we've been distributing in the community grew 170% last year from the previous year (and we're blessed to have such a wonderful team of workers who are deeply committed to serving the people of this town by facilitating this ministry). In the last year alone, they gave out over 5,000 bags of groceries that were donated by people of this congregation and this community. Ramping up our distribution of food is a wonderful way to do something new, and it blesses the community around us in new ways

And think about the new ways that we're worshiping now. There are about 30 of us here in this room, but there are also 10 people in our Facebook group right now, and we've got about another 12 joining us on YouTube, and three more people are calling in over the phone. So we continue to gather, but we do so in new ways. And this is wonderful because we are enabling people to join us for worship that have been excluded for years because they're not able to come to the church in person. Increasing the access people have to our

worship is a wonderful new way that we can bless our community and serve one another.

And so what other new ways will we grow as a church? What new things will we do? How will we encourage our fellowship to increase? I invite those of you who are members to join us for our council meeting following this service to learn about all the things that the church is doing now, even in this covid-time we find ourselves in. And you can offer your voice, we can challenge one another to find new ways to carry the blessed burden of loving others in the world, and we can ask ourselves how we can better use our perfectly-aged resources to bless the world around us.

And think about your own life this morning as we are in the Lenten season. God has created you for this very moment, not for yesterday, but for today. And so what have you been created to do today? What has God made you to do for others? And what new name is God giving you this day? What new action is God calling you to take? I hope that you find this day, whatever it is that God is calling you to do, and whatever new name God is calling you to take, you take it and do it with gusto, that you do all that you can to serve God and bring a greater blessing to the world. May it be so for all of us on this good day. Amen.