

“Free Together”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
September 10, 2023 - Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 18
[Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20](#)

Our first reading from Exodus tells us about the establishment of a very special, family holiday food tradition. Does your family have one of these? Perhaps you gather with others for Christmas each year and enjoy a turkey or ham along with Aunt Pearl’s “world-famous” pearled onions, or Uncle Larry’s self-prized mashed turnips, or sister Nelly’s infamous green bean casserole. If your family is from another part of the world, your traditional Christmas meal probably looks different than this. In Italy, Christmas is often celebrated with a Feast of Seven Fishes. If you were in Norway, your meal might include *lutefisk*, which is fish that has been soaked in lye until it develops a jelly-like texture. In South Korea, you might enjoy the barbecued beef dish *bulgogi* along with *kimchi*.

Our Christmas meals, like so many other holiday food traditions, vary from place to place and family to family and might change as we and those with whom we gather change. This is quite unlike the holiday food tradition we read about in Exodus, which tells us about the Passover meal that the Israelite families were to prepare and consume together before being led out of Egypt by Moses and then to continue preparing and consuming again each year to remember how God delivered them from bondage. This ancient tradition was still being practiced in the time of Jesus by his family and friends and it continues to this day, with our Jewish siblings still eating this unchanging traditional meal of unleavened bread and lamb as a way to remember God’s provision of freedom and that they, though being a diverse collection of families, are one community of God’s people.

We are gathered here on this Rally Sunday as another unique community of God’s people and we are continuing one of our own food traditions by having an indoor Rally Day picnic following our service (I am very happy to report that we will be enjoying sub sandwiches and not green bean casserole or *lutefisk*). I am very glad that we are able to gather together to enjoy this meal with one another again in Fellowship Hall as we continue to resume some of our gathering and eating traditions that were put on hold during the pandemic. While not as central to our

identity as a Passover meal is for our Jewish friends, the meals we share together do help us to be more united as a diverse church family and to recognize that we are a community of people who truly belong to one another.

In our gospel lesson from Matthew, we read a bit about what belonging to one another looks like. In this passage, we are given guidance for dealing with someone in a church community that causes some harm to another member of the church. We are instructed that if another has offended us, we are to meet with the offending person to discuss the problem. If that doesn't remedy the situation, we are instructed to try again with two or three others. If that doesn't work, we are told to bring it before the whole church community, still seeking reconciliation. At no point are we instructed act as though nothing wrong has been done, nor are we taught to deal with the person who offends us or with whom we disagree or that we dislike by throwing them under the bus or by disrespecting them in some other way. Rather we are always to act in ways that help us identify real problems between people so that we can facilitate reconciliation and restoration of fellowship if possible. Because we belong to each other in this community, we humbly do the difficult work of seeking the well-being of all, including those offending or otherwise disagreeable members.

Because we belong to each other, we also carry other burdens that promote the well-being of our community. One of these is just showing up in some way, being active participants in the life of the church. As we gather on this Rally Sunday and think about getting back into our school-year routines, we should all consider how we are currently active in the church, whether that is by participating in worship or joining in the work of one of our ministries for one another or that serves the community or by meeting together with others during fellowship times, and we should think about how we can either renew or ramp up our commitment to support one another by showing up.

Yesterday, I was reading across an article in the New York Times from a columnist who wrote about passing on her religious traditions to her children. The columnist recognized that she herself is not an active participant in a faith community, nor does she want her children to be, and yet she wants them to be educated about their faith so that when they are old enough to choose for

themselves, should they so desire, they would be able to jump right in to the life of a community, already understanding its beliefs and practices.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work this way in our faith (or in the author's faith tradition). Belonging and participating are essential components of our beliefs and practices. Although the community-free approach to faith is becoming increasingly common in America, we should never seek to have such an approach for ourselves or our children here. Rather we should not only show up, but find ways to include our kids so that they develop a sense of belonging as well.

As we journey forward together into this new school year on this Rally Sunday, let us journey together. Let us find ways to grow our fellowship, especially if we've wandered away from it because of a pandemic, or because someone here has done us wrong, or because we've done someone else wrong. Let us bind ourselves more closely to one another. We will find that as a community, as families, and as individuals, we will find in our fellowship not a way that shackles us, but a tradition that helps us become freer and to flourish. Let us work to become free together. Amen.