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Text: Exodus 18: 13-24  
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### Becoming What We Endeavor To Be

There may be some among us this morning who expect a word about what has taken place in Memphis. Given the work around racial justice that we've pursued for the past several years, that's a reasonable expectation. Like many of you, it has been on my mind this week, and especially since Friday night. There is much to say, and we will get there. Though it might be one more sign of white privilege to be able to think and speak about something else today, I confess that I need more time than I had to think and to speak coherently about it all. And so I beg your patience.

Because this is the Sunday of our annual meeting, I wish to offer some thoughts about where we are as a congregation, and where we might yet arrive. And the place to start, it seems to me, is with the Book of Exodus. There, we find an early template for a healthy and thriving organization. The vision it provides could apply to corporations, to non-profits, to governments and to schools, but it most certainly applies to churches. Moses has led the ancient Hebrews out of Egypt and into the wilderness, but he's a one man show. Everything revolves around him. When decisions need to be made, Moses is asked to make them. When judgments need to be rendered, Moses must render them. When questions are asked, Moses must answer them. When complaints are made, Moses must address them. It's sapping the life out of him - though I'd like to point out that Moses didn't know just how good he had it. He didn't have email, or texts! His father-in-law, Jethro, sees the burden that Moses is carrying, and he urges him to create a kind of early organizational flow chart, distributing and delegating authority among the people. That leads to two important developments. First, it helps Moses to preserve his own sanity, but second, it empowers the people around him to participate in the project of living out the vision and vocation to which God had called them.

Hang onto that vision for just a moment. We'll come back to it. For now, let me simply say that the story of Moses and his father in law provides a key to all that I wish to convey to you this morning about who we are as a community of faith. More to the point, it provides a model that helps disclose some of our greatest assets here at FCCOL, as well as a strategy for our future as a community of faith, including some of the long term challenges we face, challenges that it turns out many faith communities are facing.

But first, let me tell you a story. At a recent clergy meeting, I heard a local colleague, not in Old Lyme, say that the volunteer network at her church had been shredded by Covid. The year - and for some people, the years - of staying at home on Sundays had been converted into a habit, and many people simply weren't returning, she said. There was a cascading effect that could be felt everywhere. There were fewer people on Sundays, and thus fewer people invested in the day to day and week to week life of the community. There were fewer people pledging a portion of their income, and there were fewer people willing to shoulder the responsibility of making things happen - whether outreach, justice work, or just the basic operations of the church. Combined with a steep decline in church attendance over the past two decades, Covid simply hastened a process that was already underway in many congregations. At that clergy meeting, there were many heads nodding in recognition as my colleague spoke.

I admit that when I hear such reports, I feel a sense of both relief and also a sense of foreboding. Relief because, thus far, FCCOL would be the envy of many other faith communities. We haven't been decimated. You're all here! You've come back. We continue to have a vital worship tradition. We have a strong outreach program. We have a dynamic ministry for young people - and those are just a few of our strengths. I feel immense relief about that, and gratitude as well. But there's a creeping sense of foreboding because, despite the vitality we do possess, we are not immune to the wider trends and trajectories of the culture around us. We too are subject to the same buffeting winds that have afflicted so many of our fellow churches. It would be hubris to imagine that we are not so afflicted.

What are those buffeting winds? Well, there's not a week that goes by when some story does not land in my inbox about declining religiosity among those in the United States. You've probably read them too. There are stories of repurposed churches, converted into private dwellings, restaurants, bars, retail spaces, and clubs. There are stories of all but empty pews on Sundays. There are stories about clergy stretched too thin, and there are stories of communities that have reimagined what it is to be a church in the first place, meeting in gardens, or on forest trails. There are stories of congregations that have splintered over political questions, like one I read this summer about a popular pastor of an evangelical church who saw his congregation turn on him when he expressed his reservations about Trumpism. Each of those stories is accompanied by statistics gathered from the Pew Center, or from Gallup, charting the fortunes of churches for the past 20 years. Most point to a decline of about 20 to 25% since the turn of the century in people who belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque. When Gallup first began tracking such numbers in 1937, fully 73% of the US population belonged to a church. That number hovered at about that level for the next six decades until the turn of the century. There was a bubble after September 11th, but then a steady trickle began to occur. The percentage of the population who are religiously affiliated now stands at around 47%.<sup>1</sup>

That's not all bad news. For starters, we have a far more diverse population than we did some 90 years ago. And there's greater latitude not to have to show up at a house of worship for social reasons if you wish to fit into a community, meaning, perhaps, that people are freer to be who they are. So too, a good many people have wearied, rightly, of the intolerance that has emanated from many churches - the barely veiled white supremacy, the anti-LGBTQ stances, the anti-science attitudes that even churches who should know better too often tacitly endorse. I too wish to keep my distance from such expressions. Viewed from a certain angle, declining religiosity may not be entirely bad.

But I also think there are other factors at work. Rather than making an explicit statement against religion, for many the pattern has unfolded gradually. It tends to look like this: those in the baby boom generation, the grandparents in our midst, may have been in the habit of weekly church attendance. Their children, now firmly in middle age - Gen X or Gen Z - may have a belief in God but because of schedules or other competing obligations, often don't attend church. By the time you get to the millennials, then, their children, very few people have had much exposure to church or religion at all, save for what they see in the media, which is usually not great. I sensed that reality recently when I invited some parents in my own age bracket -

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<sup>1</sup> See Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," March 29, 2021, published on [news.gallup.com](https://news.gallup.com).

maybe slightly younger - to join us in church sometime. They've got nothing against church, so far as I could tell, but it was as if I had suggested joining the Masons or the Lion's Club. Attending a church just seemed to belong to a different era. That's what I sensed when I made my invitation.

That experience suggests that indeed, we are facing the same headwinds that others are confronting. But some of our internal experience here at FCCOL points that way as well. For example, over the years, the Board of Stewardship has had to work harder and harder to meet our annual stewardship goal. That has meant that the Board of Missions has seen the amount of money reserved for benevolences reduced when compared to earlier decades. And it's also true that the Board of Trustees has had to work harder and harder to present a balanced budget every year. That task became exceedingly difficult in this year of runaway inflation, but they managed to do it, thanks to the remainder of the PPP loan we received, and thanks to a contingency reserve created for precisely this reason. We're ok right now, but all signs indicate that the coming years may present difficulties.

But here's where the story gets interesting. When I first began thinking about all this in relation to FCCOL, I imagined that we had peaked, in terms of membership numbers, in the mid to late 90's, with a bump after 9/11 when people returned to churches in greater numbers. That would have mirrored the national trajectory. Instead, another story emerged. One afternoon, I called our church clerk, the indefatigable and indispensable Joanie May. She pulled out some old annual reports, and discovered that during the 90's - the last years in which church attendance for Mainline denominations like ours were still on that high plateau - the membership of FCCOL was much the same as it is now, hovering between 700 or 800 members. Those numbers did indeed increase post-9/11, and we have, since 2009 or so, experienced a trickling decrease of overall membership. That's a reality we all need to take seriously. But I want you to hear and understand this: in the 1980's and 1990's, when church attendance was still extraordinarily high in the United States, FCCOL was essentially what it is today. That means that, despite the challenges we do face, when taking a long view, we've managed to counter the national trends.

That has something to do with our willingness to do things a little differently. It has to do with the strong core of volunteers that make up the heart of our community. It has to do with our outstanding music program and our inspiring worship. It has to do with our innovative partnerships and cultural exchanges. It has to do with our local outreach, and our willingness to say and do bold and surprising things. It has to do with the ways that all of you generously support the work of this place. Given everything, we are in a remarkably strong position as a faith community.

Having said that, we do need to face into the reality of a diminished pledge base, and a steady trickle of membership losses. That has had, and it will have in the future, consequences for the kind of ministry we enact in this place. And so here's where I want to bring us back around to the book of Exodus, and to Moses and Jethro. That's a vision of shared, or what we in the churches call, lay leadership. It's a vision of an active and engaged community, where responsibility for that community is shared by all, and not just an active few. It's an excellent template for a functional democracy, but it's also an ideal meant for any communal organization, including and especially churches. Thankfully, here again, we're ahead of the curve. Because we do already have a strong and active base who are deeply committed to this place. If we conceive of a community as consisting of several concentric rings of people, moving from very active, to moderately active, to not really active at all, the question is how we move more people

from the outer rings closer to the center. Those are the questions that our Trustees have been wrestling with for the past several months. They've been asking about how to enact Jethro's vision in the wilderness.

They've come up with several strong recommendations. First, they strongly advocated a strategy of education. They believe that the congregation - all of you - need to be informed of the challenges before us, that we might all contribute what we can to maintain our dynamic ministries, and the sense of momentum that makes this place feel so vital. This sermon represents a piece of that, and the meeting to follow certainly does as well. But we may need to explore other avenues as well, such as an adult forum, or maybe more than one. Education is the first component. Second, they recommended that during the next year, we begin a process of visiting, in small groups and individually, as many of our members and friends as possible, as a means of hearing what feels important to people, as well as a means of exploring how more of our members might come to feel more engaged in our work. And what is our work, you may ask? Here's how I'd frame it: in ways large and sometimes very small, our work is to help make our part of the world, and not only our corner of the world, a little more hospitable, a little more compassionate, and a little more just, in accordance with the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the Hebrew prophets, and other ancient and contemporary voices. It is, furthermore, to help preserve and enhance the bonds of communal affection that are necessary for human and yes, for ecological well-being on the planet, a vision which we believe has theological roots. We're seeing all the ways that a frayed social fabric leads to not only mistrust, but also paranoia, alienation, hostility, and ultimately to catastrophic violence. The question for all of our members is, how might we best continue to do those things? And how might we broaden that vision? The Trustees would like to initiate a process of visitation that would allow us to hear from our community.

Finally, the Trustees recommended that we engage in an ancient theological practice that has come to seem antiquated and uncomfortable for many among us: evangelism. They have the novel idea that we might all intentionally invite our friends and neighbors to be a part of our community. There may be those, as I discovered, who simply don't understand what we do, and there may be those who don't wish to be a part of it. It's ever been so. But the Trustees believe, as do I, that there is a hunger among many people for exactly the kind of faith that is practiced at FCCOL, one that is both faithful and critically informed, one that is rooted in ancient wisdom while attuned to the pressing humanitarian and justice needs of the world around us. In other words, we do something here that's worth being proud of. If that's true, then it's worth it to share it with others, who might also come to be excited about what this place represents, and what it might offer to their lives. Evangelism, then, is the third recommendation.

I'm grateful for the wisdom, perspective, and optimistic spirit of the entire Board of Trustees. They're helping to enact the vision of Jethro, and of Moses in Exodus 18. I too remain optimistic and excited about the coming year - the coming years! - in the life of our church. I actually see opportunities for renewal and growth in all of this, even as we continue to concentrate on the many facets of our community that make us who we are - a strong outreach program with dynamic partnerships, wonderful music, inspiring worship services, potlucks, educational opportunities, youth and family activities, small discussion groups, and last but not least, a White Elephant Sale. Those are all ways of preserving our bonds of affection. There will, of course, be some new endeavors, focused on the poetic traditions that have shaped our understanding, and some additional explorations into the African perspectives and practices that helped to shape Old Lyme, New England, and really, all of the Americas. But more than

anything, there shall be opportunities to hear from one another, to know one another better, and to strengthen the threads that hold us together.

I'll close by returning to the image my clergy colleague shared, though now in reverse. Contrary to what many other institutions are facing, our volunteer networks at FCCOL have not been shredded. We remain strong. And now is the time to build on that strength, to ensure that we'll remain so for years and years to come.

I want you to know that I - and all of the ministers and staff - couldn't be more honored to be a part of FCCOL and all that it represents. I hope you feel the same, as we join in endeavoring to become all that we wish to be.