

# SERMON

## STARTERS

Betty Jane Young

**September 1, 2002**  
**14th Sunday after Pentecost**  
Exod. 3:1-15; Ps. 105:1-6, 23-26,  
45c; Rom. 12:9-21; Mt. 16:21-28

Labor Day, September 2nd, is the unofficial end of vacation time and the beginning of another year of activities. For many, the weeks to follow will be busy as we welcome one another back and begin to gear up for ministry. A colleague once described entering the fall as analogous to driving down a highway at 60 miles an hour and hitting a wall. The wall we hit in the church today may be called the wall of over-commitment. It seems as if everyone is busy. When trying to set a date with ten people, you generally get ten reasons why they can't meet up with you. They are attending athletic events, business meetings, socials, etc. How do we find the time to keep our commitment with Christ fresh and alive?

The readings today speak of God's encounter with humanity throughout history. God chose men and women. He met them where they stood and challenged them to become more than they thought they could be. In choosing and calling, God was asking for commitment. It's a commitment to take up the cross, or the cause that God has for us. Today we look at Moses, a man on the run, who found himself standing on Holy Ground, challenged to leave the sheep pastures of his father-in-law and to walk with God to



**Betty Jane Young** is pastor of **Vincent United Methodist Church** in Nutley, New Jersey.

lead his people to freedom. Moses could have said that he was too busy and had enough to do where he was, but that was not God's will. God called Moses and Moses responded.

Although centuries later Peter was given the opportunity of walking with Jesus as a disciple, he was unwilling or unable to hear Jesus when he spoke of the cost of Discipleship. Jesus was speaking about pain and suffering, carrying a cross, and being a servant. Peter wanted strength and victory. Life and power were part of Peter's understanding, therefore, he could not fully make the commitment to discipleship.

What are we committed to today? What are the crosses we would pick up as individuals and congregations? "Take up your cross and follow me," and when you take up the cross, behold, you may find yourself standing on Holy Ground.

**September 8, 2002**  
**15th Sunday after Pentecost**  
Exod. 12:1-14; Ps. 149;  
Rom. 13:8-14; Mt. 18:15-20

Today might be Rally Day or Homecoming at your church. This is a time to welcome and rehearse the etiquette of the church family. I am often amazed when I hear people talk about others in the church. How often the service is barely over and the criticism begins. The organ was too loud, the preacher spoke too long, the children were too noisy, etc. Maybe this doesn't happen in your church, and if not, be thankful. How do we treat one another inside and outside of the church? What do people see when they come to worship, attend a church school class or church event? I lived in a small town for a short time and was amazed to see how many people knew the business of the church before the church leadership knew it. The telephone lines could have been burned out by the

numerous amounts of calls. In addition to gossiping, the people of this congregation wondered why their church did not grow.

There are times of dispute in congregations and there are times when we need to confront one another, but this should be done in love, and with care for our brothers and sisters. Matthew 18:15-20 sets out a plan for encouraging members of the body of Christ to confront one another. The issue addressed is sin. How is the sinner confronted? First, you approach the person one on one, point out the fault, and try to bring about a resolution. If you fail to handle the situation in this manner, you are to bring others into the discussion. The next steps seem very difficult. If the party who has sinned refuses to change, then the congregation should be informed. The sinner is then to be treated like a "Gentile and a tax collector" and put outside the community. In this dealing, one had to be certain that the accused had received a fair hearing. The witnesses functioned as "referee" and "judge." We are reminded by the text, "Where two or three are gathered in My Name, I am there among you." The church of Jesus Christ exists when all are a part of the picture.

Several years ago, while serving as a counselor for a junior high youth program, it became quite evident that these groups of youngsters were anything but Christian toward each other. They did not work well together and they did not cooperate in any way. As we prepared for the final evening's campfire, my co-counselor and I decided that we would try to help them see what they were doing. We suggested a different version of "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love." Instead, we sang, "They'll Know We're Not Christians, We Do Not Love."

There was much discussion after we presented this to our team, but we ended the week working as a unit who could sing, "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love."

**September 15, 2002**

**16th Sunday after Pentecost**

Exod. 14:19-31; Exod. 15:1b-11, 20-21; Rom. 14:1-12; Mt. 18:21-25

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At the end of the Apartheid era in South Africa, a system had to be established to help the people move on with life. A truth commission was set up. Alex Boraine, vice-chair of the truth commission, stated, "Is it not a better alternative to deal with the past through the means of a commission which has a limited life and move forward into the future?" A defendant who is able to convince The Truth and Reconciliation Commission that the crimes were politically motivated and that they are telling the truth, may be granted amnesty and a ticket out of prison. Although not everyone is happy with this arrangement, there are other voices speaking out about the importance of forgiveness and letting go. The trip to freedom into the new South Africa had begun. This was not the place to carry old burdens. The story regarding the end of the Apartheid era serves as a witness to the power of God and a call to faith.

The story of the escape from Egypt by the Israelites is a tale of new beginnings. It is also a story that shows the power of God. The Egyptians recognized this power and said, "Let us flee from the Israelites; for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." As one reads the accounts of the escape from Egypt, there is a powerful sense of God being in control. God has the power to bring darkness or light on the scene. God can part the sea and allow the Israelites to slip through while the Egyptians are drowned. We might want to sing, "Our God is an awesome God," for God has led us into victory.

**September 22, 2002**

**17th Sunday after Pentecost**

Exod. 16:2-15; Ps. 105:1-6, 37-45 or Ps. 78; Phil. 1:21-30; Mt. 20:1-16

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We see a picture of human nature in this 16th chapter of Exodus. These same people had struggled under the rule of the Egyptians for years, serving as the slave

labor who built the pyramids and countless sturdy buildings. At last, God sent a leader to lead the people out of Egypt. Once outside its borders, the journey became more difficult. The people began to grumble about being in a lonely and barren land. Soon they started to talk about Egypt as if it were the promised land. Some wondered why they had left in the first place. Quickly, the people, who had given thanks to Moses and Aaron, turned against them and began demanding that God intervene. Moses took this concern to the Lord and was told that every day there would be enough food for everyone. God provided quail for meat and manna for bread for the rest of the journey. One might relate this to the later distribution of the Holy Communion, when the bread and wine were shared. Often the Christian, on his journey, becomes discouraged, and forgets what it was like to live without Christ. The lessons this week remind us of God's generosity. God provides for us according to what we need rather than what we have earned.

It is easy to become discouraged, looking back at what we had rather than to the present and the possibilities of the future. Too often the world in which we live seems to drain us rather than fill us and strengthen our resolve. Most of us want quick responses or we don't want any. How do you function when under pressure? Can you turn it over to God?

**September 29, 2002**

**18th Sunday after Pentecost**

Exod. 17:1-7; Ps. 78:1-4, 12-16; Phil. 2:1-13; Mt. 21:23-32

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In the letter to the Philippians, Paul is appealing for unity among the Christians at Philippi. Verse I of Chapter 2 begins with a list of reasons for this encouragement to be one. It will "make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." These words came when the church seemed to become more and more divided, bringing about two starting points. If this is the church of Jesus Christ, how do we mend the divisions which so often are counter productive to our ministry?

Missionaries tell of the difficulty that they sometimes find when denomina-

tionalism rears its head on the mission field. New Christians do not join churches because of their policy or because of their books of discipline, but because the church preaches Jesus Christ as Lord. In places where there has been agreement on how to bring people to Christ, and when denominations work together, it is less likely that fighting will take place between the various faith communities.

Philippians is an appeal for church unity using Christ as the model. For Paul, the fact that Christ humbled himself, and became like us, is a critical key. Verses 6-11 are the words of an old Christian hymn which Paul uses to make his point about the unity of the church, and the core creedal statements they follow. We live in a world where unity matters, where people are disillusioned by break ups and where competition is often the key to church dissatisfaction. We ought to heed Paul's letter and open ourselves to being the Church of Jesus Christ. The road toward Christian Unity is a long journey, but we are on the way. However, if we have not yet begun this task, it might be a good time to begin looking at the material that is being published and to start helping our churches understand where the United Methodist Church takes its stand on these matters.

This might also be a good week to begin to prepare for World Wide Communion to be celebrated on October 6th.

**October 6, 2002**

**19th Sunday after Pentecost**

**World Wide Communion Sunday**

Exod. 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Ps. 19; Phil. 3:4b-14; Mt. 21:33-46

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It was the first Sunday of October and the three churches around the square were preparing to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. Tables were brought out and set up in the form of a cross, the communion elements were brought out from each sanctuary and all was made ready for the liturgy to begin. The Ten Commandments, the covenant given by God to Moses, are to be read this day. When these words are read, every Christian is reminded of their connection to the Old Testament and that we are all bound through this covenant. A review of the commandments helps us

continue our journey toward understanding what is required of us to be followers of Christ. These commandments:

- Speak about honoring an Awesome God.
- Encourage the reader to find a place of rest and maintain the Sabbath day.
- Assert the rights of human beings to live in a community recognizing that human life is precious and that we are to honor each person.

Back at the park, the celebration goes on. While celebrating the Lord's Supper we lift the names of those who have died during this past year. We gather amid a host of witnesses: those who have gone before us and those who will follow. Neighbors who live within two blocks of each other are for the first time coming to a table and breaking bread together. The community concerns are lifted in prayer and God begins to move among the people. In the midst of it all we hear "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. Out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other god before me."

### **October 13, 2002** **20th Sunday after Pentecost**

Exod. 32:1-14; Ps. 106:1-6, 19-23;  
Phil. 4:1-9; Mt. 22:1-14

**H**ave you ever planned a party, sent invitations, prepared for the event and had no one come? Several years ago I planned an Epiphany party. I figured that since everyone would be busy at Christmas, this would extend the holiday season and take some of the pressure off. Everything was carefully planned and on Friday night, January 6th, I was ready. By 7:30 I knew that something was wrong. No one had arrived and no one had called. I phoned one of my friends and soon discovered that on the invitations I had put Saturday, January 7th as the day of the Epiphany. All was not lost. Since everyone was coming the next day, I put things in refrigeration and prepared for my guests' arrival on Saturday. This was my mistake, but since then I've never had a gathering of friends when I don't consider the possibility that no one may show up.

In Jesus's day it was the custom to send an invitation to a wedding feast well in advance. Following this, a messenger was sent out when the meal was cooked. In today's parable, the invited guests declined the invitation at the last minute. They all had legitimate reasons, and yet one questions why they had not shared their concerns and reasons when first invited.

Seeing this as a parable, a story about an invitation to the Kingdom of God, it is important to note that when those who were invited first did not respond, the master sent out the servants to find others who would come. This may be a warning to us in the church today, that we can become so busy that we do not leave the time to attend to the activities which really matter.

### **October 20, 2002** **21st Sunday after Pentecost**

Exod. 33:12-23; Ps. 99;  
I Thess. 1:1-10; Mt. 22:15-22

**T**oday may well be observed as Laity Sunday. For some this means a time to have the Laity put together for the service of worship, or to preach or have a service of recognition. Whatever your plans, you might want to use I Thessalonians for one of your readings. Paul had spent about three or four weeks in Thessalonica; they were busy and successful weeks. For an account of this visit you should read Acts 17:1-10.

Having been smuggled out of town to avoid confrontation, they begin to look at ways for their ministry to grow. It seems that there has been a strong group of laity in this area who have given much to make the ministry happen. The message of the gospel is given to this group who gather in prayer and praise. In citing this as an example, Paul remembers the importance of the lay volunteer in order to have a fully functioning church. Paul writes to thank the church for what it has done and looks toward the future for challenging one another.

As a church in the twenty first century, we need to give thanks to those who have made the ministry possible. Paul remembers the Christians who did works of faith, carried a ministry of love, lived

in steadfast hope and were told that they were beloved and chosen by God.

At a special Laity Sunday observance one might honor the laity of the church who have exhibited gifts or graces in these areas.

### **October 27, 2002** **22nd Sunday after Pentecost**

Deut. 34:1-12; Ps. 90:1-6, 13-17;  
I Thes. 2:1-8; Mt. 22:34-46

**M**oses was called out by God to lead the people of Israel into a new land, a land of freedom, which flowed with milk and honey. We are told that he led the people through the wilderness for forty years. It was a long journey that landed them at the place which God had promised them. The Lord said to Moses, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants. I will let you see it with your eyes, but you will not crossover there.'"

Moses' life was anything but easy. Saved as a baby by his sister and mother, Moses was given certain privileges as a child of the daughter of the king. When the call came from God for him to lead the Israelites across the dessert to a new homeland, no one could imagine where the journey would take him. As an old man he was taken to see a panoramic view of the promised land. After seeing the land, Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab.

This text could be used to look at a variety of questions:

- How can we remain faithful to God's call?
- What does it mean to us today to be faithful?
- Are there wildernesses we still must cross?
- Have we learned to be more faithful, and to stick with the job even if we do not know when it will be over?

You may want to spend some time working in small groups on this interpersonal activity. □