

HAGGAI 1:15b-2:9 or JOB 19:23-27a

PSALM 145:1-5, 17-21 or PSALM 98 or PSALM 17:1-9

II THESSALONIANS 2:1-5, 13-17

LUKE 20:27-38

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost; Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 6, 2022; Year C

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

The Long View!

“The Long and Winding Road” is a song by the Beatles from their 1970 album *Let It Be!* As I thought about all things All Saints this week, the words in the title of this popular song written by Paul McCartney seemed to be fitting in so many ways, lyrically echoing in my mind. How quickly we learn that life is a marathon and not a sprint as we reminisce on the passage of time, yes, the sweeping spectrum spanning the ages. Along with the Celebration of Reformation Heritage last week, a Sunday service in which I sought to show the direct lineage from the early Church Fathers to the Protestant Reformation, including a host of disagreeably restless and contentedly peaceful souls, all Christian disciples down through the years who have traveled this amazing and adventuresome faith journey right up even until all of us right now in these real time moments. Yes, these two abundantly overflowing weeks, full of metaphorical symbolism, gift us brief moments in time, allowing us to contemplate, encouraging us with the precious, the sacred, opportunity to catch our breath while providing a rearview mirror through which we can catch a glimpse, a hint, as we remember, an opportunity to pause and reflect individually and collectively. These special observances call us to a biblical Kairos time within our routine, ordinary—Ordinary Time being the operative image—Chronos calendars, mindful this morning of the dreaded time-change that emotionally and even physically affects our external and internal clocks, groggy as we may be, to look back and give thanks to our forebears, our forefathers and mothers in the faith. Today we celebrate all those upon who’s large, yes, ginormous, shoulders we stand, no matter their beliefs, the ecclesiological and/or theological positions to which they faithfully and firmly held, sometimes enduring a martyr’s death for their cause. We respect their resolve as they held fast to their convictions, whether those be good, bad, and ugly, but never indifferent, specific cases in which these pilgrims passionately, zealously, argued, often in vain, for their unique and various biblical or churchly viewpoints. Yes, we indeed have been blessed with these treasures in earthen vessels! We owe these saintly souls a great deal in what is a profound heritage, a sacred spiritual lineage, filled with much gratitude for the service and sacrifice of our forebears.

All who have gone before us have helped to shape us, to mold us into who we are and are becoming as individuals and as the Church and local churches, all the varied congregations that now dot the landscape, including our own beloved faith community. What a great legacy is ours to enjoy, to embrace, and safeguard, beholding this “great cloud of witnesses,” as the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews describes them. These are the people whom the late Baptist theologian Carlyle Marney, my mentor’s mentor, described as “the balcony people,” all of them watching and cheering us on toward the prize as we continue to preserve and protect the precious faith carefully handed down to us by those who have gone before, yes, saints all, All Saints! After all, sainthood is not reserved for those who are officially bequeathed that lofty title, given by pontifical pronouncements in Rome, it is a glorious, wonderful, mysterious, moniker granted to all us sinners, our saintliness always outshining even the worst of our lowest human moments. Today, as with last Sunday’s celebratory liturgical feast, is a day to rejoice and give thanks, to sing with glorious praises the goodness of our God, the One who created us, the One who imbued us with a saintly original goodness, creating us all in the shadow of the *imago Dei*, in the very perfect image of the Divine, original sin nowhere on our creator’s radar when we were first perceived, yes, conceived, as the crown of all creation, all above the created order, dominion our global stewardship, our divinely accountable responsibility! Yes, what a glorious day this is! We remember! We honor! We treasure! It is all about family and friends and oh so much more. It is a glad celebration of all our human being and doing, even as we lament the evils, the reality of wickedness that constantly nips at our heels, often temptingly alluring, always seeking to destroy our joy.

The writer of the second letter to the Thessalonians, presumably but not with absolute certainty the apostle Paul, was concerned about the mythical second coming of Jesus, what theologians call the *Parousia*. This epistolary writer urges his reader to remain faithful, to remember all the things they were taught when Paul, or this presumably Pauline influenced writer, was with them. The writer of this epistle wants nothing more than for these faithful folk at the young church at Thessalonica to remain steadfast, to hold onto the truth as they had come to believe it, understandings they had learned and had joyfully come to know and revere. This eloquent writer then admonishes the congregation to “hold fast to the traditions you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter!” And it is these sage words of wisdom that form a major portion of the backdrop for our homiletical journey today, a reminder of essential imperatives, yes, the most important lessons that we must never forget, that indeed, we remember as we honor with our lives and our living the legacy that is a gracious gift, a living and breathing faith, an inheritance, yes, an heirloom, given to all humanity. We are all saints because we are all grafted with the very Spirit of the Holy, the divine spark permanently instilled within us, yes, indelibly stamped upon us with God’s holy imprimatur, divine DNA that images, delightfully imagines, every human being and doing as mirrors, yes, walking and talking, reflections of God! These spiritual blessings are eternally

gracious gifts that even when out of mind are never far away from us. We enjoy, treasuring them daily as we go about the business and pleasures of our lives. It is a reminder that we do not stand alone as believers trusting in the loving way of Jesus as a people of faith, yes, spiritual faith, all of us as we seek to follow Christ as our highest calling, our deepest devotion. Yes, we, as the body of Christ all around the world, are mysteriously able to intuitively sense the Christ innately manifest, amazingly sensing Christ's Spirit deeply imbued within each and every one of us as divinely inspired and inspirited human creatures.

Now if this was all we had to say this morning we would be done, but that is not the case! If by chance we happened to be the blind-leading-the-blind bobblehead types, lemmings who obediently drink the Kool Aid long advocated, promoted and promulgated by purveyors of the faith who we now know had clearly subversive agendas, not always in the best interest, rarely if ever inclusive of everyone, yes, those saints who helped shaped the Church down through the centuries, all would be well or at least would remain as is, comfortable if not a bit stagnant, and this sermon would come to a grinding halt, a quick and polite end with a nice linguistic ribbon and bow, all tied neatly around a pretty and pious package. But we are not those people! As individuals and as a beloved faith community, we tend to be the kinds of people who generally are committed to questioning the spirits and every aspect of what were once thought to be iron clad beliefs, off limits, never calling into question what have long been thought to be hallmarks, doctrinal essentials of the faith, dogma concretized in the beautifully written but sadistically, those who were burned at the stake as heretics would have said satanically, coercive creeds. All bets are now off as we ponder all things spiritual, testing the spirits, questioning all things religious, critically examining foundational principles routinely perceived to be set in stone, surely beyond all question, never allowing a skeptical thought or any cynical response, no feedback appreciated or welcomed. And it is these very discerning processes we see in Jesus, learning from the preaching and teaching, the mission and ministry, of our Rabboni, our example, a teaching guide and mentor, a reformer whose analytics of the ancient Judaic faith caused more than a stir, more than just a slight rumble, the reverberations shaking the very foundations of the ancient faith. Yes, we need not look any further for our north star than the man from Nazareth, Jesus, our best, most excellent, perfect exemplary model for learning, for life and living. The good rabbi took nothing for granted and nothing at face value, challenging the pervading and prevailing tradition that had devolved, digressing into some of the worst lifestyle practices, unreasonable expectations and requirements demanded of a people who were already vulnerably compromised as a result of Caesar's Roman occupation of Israel. In Jesus' humble estimation the Jewish faith was no longer a joy, freeing and liberating, but was now a drudgery, dulling the senses, a weighty exercise, a baneful existence filled with the baggage of a seemingly unlimited and unending supply of inane and irrelevant rules and regulations, all of it making life miserable by the faithful who desperately tried faithfully to toe the line and follow their oppressively demanding leaders. Following Jesus meant then and now that the rules were made to be broken! Jesus gives us

permission to raise questions, to critique the traditional beliefs that have indeed for good and ill helped shape, form both the Church then and now and our faith, yes, our long-held suspicions about certain doctrinal dogma codified, perfumed, in creeds exposing any and all discrepancies, inconsistencies, or flat-out fabrications, embellishments and exaggerations. We can own as a gift, a privilege, yes, a right, our skepticism, even cynicism, and yes, of course, our doubt! We can be proud of our inquiries, free to doubt and even deny when necessary! After all, we have been taught, programmed, to feel guilt, to admit to being guilty, considering ourselves unworthy to offer our voice, when we dare express a divergent, contrary, opinion, when we have the audacity to give an alternative or minority viewpoint. The search, our eternal search for ultimate truth is a gracious intellectual and divine expectation that never has an ending, is never located on a dead-end street. Take just one example, picking grain on the Sabbath! Jesus' take was that the Sabbath was made for humanity and not the opposite. So, eat up and enjoy!

In today's lection from Luke, we find a similar story, a familiar recurring theme found in the four Gospels, in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, this time the Sadducees playing a trapping, adversarial and villainous, role. Usually, it is the cynical Pharisees who give Jesus such a hard time. Now you must remember that while the Pharisees embraced a belief in the resurrection, the Sadducees did not! They thought, as did the earliest pre-Babylonian exilic Hebrew captives believed, that when you died you were dead, and dead was dead! DRT! Dead right there! So, they recall to Jesus the ridiculous practice called Levirate marriage, a tradition that indeed has its biblical precedents in the Hebrew Bible. Basically, according to Ronald L. Eisenberg, "Levirate marriage (yibbum) is the obligation of a surviving brother to marry the widow of his brother if he died without having sired children." Deuteronomy 25:5-6 says, "When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go into her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel." Yada! Yada! Yada! The narrative continues, "But if the man has no desire to marry his brother's widow, then his brother's widow shall go up to the elders at the gate and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.' Then the elders of his town shall summon him and speak to him. If he persists, saying, 'I have no desire to marry her,' then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull his sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and declare, 'This is what is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' Throughout Israel his family shall be known as 'the house of him whose sandal was pulled off.'" Oh, the shame of it all! This commandment was serious business back in the day and was obviously a very important law in the land. After all it follows the admonition "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," never want to be accused or guilty of that one and precedes a commandment that you will need to see for

yourself because it is not suitable for Sunday morning sermonic fodder! See Deuteronomy 25:11-12) if you are curious! And there are so many more! **One thing I can say for sure, with absolute certainty, about this text and this secondary commandment, and certainly about this poor multi-widowed woman, is that she was one unlucky lady! It might be unfair, but perhaps she had the terminal effect of typhoid Mary!**

And so, the Sadducees, because they were all so sad-you-see, (I have always wanted to get that line in a sermon), arrogantly and disrespectfully remind the reputable rabbi, this noted teacher, of the consequences, the eternal weal and woe at stake, the scorn implied in disobeying this very explicit command. After doing their very odd version of Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, they smugly ask of the rabbi, "In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?" Jesus knew full well this tradition codified as Deuteronomic law and he also knew the intent of their question, another not-so-veiled attempt to trick and trap him! Trick or trap! Well, for whatever reason on this day, Jesus chose to answer them directly, an answer that revealed their true intents and purposes and succinctly put them in their place! The conclusion to his detailed answer, "God is not a God of the dead but of the living, for to God all of them (referring to the deceased brothers) are alive!" How stupid his answer made them look. On second thought, how stupid they made themselves look! Nothing like fools, idiots, and morons to brighten your day! One thing we learn about Jesus is that he did not suffer fools, idiots, and morons! And unfortunately, these bottom feeders, recently referred to as "a bucket of deplorables," frequently turned out to be the religious leaders who certainly knew better! Jesus' not-so-subtle belittling rebuke is a reminder, that while Jesus honored the faith tradition of his birth, giving his forebears their due, remaining a lifelong Jew, that not only was he not stuck in the ruts of the past but understood full well that times, circumstances and situations, understandings, all change, are constantly, continuously, in motion, evolving as we humans grow and develop and learn. Or so we hope! This impromptu "Q and A" made for a sobering bellwether moment then and remains so every time we read it today just as with any biblical text. Yes, Jesus was the very embodiment, an exemplary model advocating for continuing revelation, yes, to recall some imagery from last Sunday, ongoing reformation. Jesus clearly embraced our creative and serendipitous United Church of Christ idea invoking the slogan that "God is still speaking," meaning for all to hear that the Spirit of the Holy is still moving, yes, blowing in the wind. Shout out to Bob Dillon! Jesus honored the tradition, respected the past and all the who and the that, that went with it, but he did not dwell there, stuck in the rut, wallowing in the malaise and mire, of yesterday's news, no matter how good it seemed or felt to those who lazily and stubbornly desired to dwell there permanently. Jesus was a radical, a revolutionary, refusing to sink into the deep chasms, the abyss of yesterday's news, that much like quicksand rarely offers any escape!

People cut from a different cloth like Jesus are restless types, the kinds of cutting-edge people who are never satisfied with status quo, rejecting outright the same old, same old, parroted ideas merely repeated as pabulum, reinforcing ad nauseum prejudicial biases and stale stereotypes. Yes, they march to the beat of a different drummer! People of this out of the box, coloring far beyond the lines, mindset tend to abstain from the drivel of mind-numbing religiosity, avoiding and ignoring as much pietistic noise, as much ritualistic religious verbosity as possible. Yes, a new wave washing ashore in our twenty-first century awareness, yet even so it can be traced to the most embryonic, the most infantile, days of the early Church, credit given to the author and finisher of our faith and all things seemingly new but very old, yes, the original saint, yes, that would be Jesus!

And so we walk a fine line, and just like our ancestors, still strive to walk by faith and not by sight, doing a bit of a tap dance, as we seek to honor tradition with all the respect that Church teaching deserves and has well-earned, even venerating parts of the past if only but on occasion, but we do so as scientifically informed space age people motivated by the pursuit of truth, who view the world, the universe, including our theology, through the vaguest of Paul's dark lenses, revealing all the incredible once-hidden discoveries that have stirred the pot and shaken human foundations ever since. Today's Lukan lection is a reminder that holding on to tradition does not mean that we put our heads in the sand and fail to acknowledge all that we now know to be true in our eternal quest for truth. In other words, we do not get stuck in our own ruts, benignly accepting the same old, same old. If we fail to continue to learn and grow, if we do not develop and evolve as a species, we will at least metaphorically surely die a most irrelevant death! Our creative and creatively active God demands from us that we continue our divinely appointed evolutionary paths as individuals and communities, including communities of faith just like ours. Here at First Congregational United Church of Christ we firmly plant our feet in two places, honoring the great traditions of the Church, including its liturgy, using ancient liturgical forms infused and enlivened with contemporary and inclusive language, the Bible gladly stressed in these words we read together. Our goal is to be a bridge, to build a bridge between the past and the future as we live the present moment by moment, embracing our own real time sainthood. Sometimes this almost impossible objective stretches us way too thin, way beyond capacity, even to the breaking point. It is a risk we take each and every week because the rewards are so fulfilling, plentiful, and wonderful. Yes, the new in-vogue trend is to do what is now bizarrely or perversely called "contemporary worship, an attempt to be more accessible and relatable to a specifically targeted clientele. I hate the way the word "contemporary" is confined, conformed, and misused! It has become a misnomer! Folks, everything we do here in this sacred space, this sanctuary setting, is contemporary! The danger of the latest fads is that we throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater and forget from whence we have come, the rock from which we are hewn, the foundational cornerstones that have survived the centuries and continue to inform and impact us as followers of Jesus who believe by faith. Part

of our goals and objectives, especially as we engage a congregational visioning process, is that we continue to refine our identity as a local missional congregation, being clear about the ethos that drives us daily. The apostle Paul once opined that he was trying to be all things to all people. That may have worked in first century ecclesial settings, but it will not work in a highly diverse, pluralistic, multicultural, world. My personal pastoral goal is to make every congregant happy and unhappy and all at the same time! We are inviting and welcoming, at the minimum tolerant, accepting if not always affirming, respecting minority opinion, the honest and sincere views of those who perhaps espouse a more conservative bent. Many, if not most, of our folks are theologically progressive, though we gladly confess that we are a diverse group when it comes to matters of belief and faith. That being said, all of us, from my still limited experience, seem open to various ecclesiological and theological viewpoints. No, let's be honest, while we are a church that welcomes everyone, as with what can be said describing the ethos of every other church, we are not a church for everyone and never will be!

So, on this high and holy festival day, let us give thanks for a glorious past, warts and all, good, bad, and ugly. Let us be eternally mindful and grateful for all those who blazed a glorious trail, illuminating our way, those who have prepared the way, who have made the paths as smooth and straight as possible, all those who have paved pathways of grace in their striving to follow Jesus. We gladly follow in their footsteps even when they are challenging, their viewpoints contrary to our knowledge, what we believe, what we hold to be true. Yes, we gladly make our own footprints as we go. Yes indeed, these are days of rejoicing! Indeed, let us rejoice in a great legacy, a wonderful heritage, cherishing a fabulous family heirloom, now ours to enjoy, knowing that we are responsible, accountable to God, our forebears in the faith, and to one another, to keep it going for generations, for millenniums, to come. On this day we pause, overwhelmed with the holiest idea, the most divine image, that we are all created as saints, no matter if and when we behave as sinners, no matter our sin or sinfulness. We are all saints because we are all created just as we are, each and every one of us made *imago Dei*, in the very image of the Divine, a gloriously gracious gift that keeps on giving. So, live boldly and proudly, courageously embracing all that has been bequeathed to you by the Holy One, every good and gracious gift of life and living that is the grandest inheritance of a loving God whose Christly Spirit is deeply instilled within us. So, keep following Jesus, the ultimate saint, the best human example of sainthood ever conceived, birthed, lived, and died! And remember, we have no choice but to take the long view! And all will be well! Thanks be to God!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us all saints, inviting us to live saintly lives devoted to the human one who has taught us best how to learn, live, and love in the world! Amen and amen.