Proper 18, Year A
Exodus 12:1-14; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

“The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.” Isn’t it great when Scripture blends so nicely into our church life? Here we are on Kick-off Sunday, the beginning of a new program year, and Scripture tells us that “this month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.” How perfect…even the day of the month coincides…did you notice? The lesson from Exodus continues: “Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household.” The coincidence is sort of great, and sort of not so great given all that this lovely lamb dinner portends. So, this is what we’re going to do…we’re going to move on to our lesson from Romans. “Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

It takes courage to live in this world. Even after all the progress made over the preceding decades, our country is embroiled in issues over race, gender and sexual identity. And, as if that isn’t enough, we are confronted with global unrest and the wrath of nature. It takes courage to live in this world. Courage is precisely what our faith offers. Verse 14 from Psalm 27 says it all: “Wait on the Lord. Be courageous, and he will strengthen your heart.” Be courageous, and he will strengthen your heart.

Recently, I learned about an inspiring organization called Life After Hate, which was created by former members of the violent, far-right extremist movement. I want to read to you how the leaders describe themselves and this organization: “Whether working with individuals who wish to leave a life of hate and violence or helping organizations (community, educational,
civic, government, etc.) grappling with the causes of intolerance and racism, Life After Hate works to counter the seeds of hate we once planted. Through personal experience and highly unique skill sets, we have developed a sophisticated understanding about what draws individuals to extremist groups and, equally important, why they leave. Compassion is the opposite of judgement and we understand the roles compassion and empathy play in healing individuals and communities.” Life After Hate is “engaged in ongoing academic research to understand pathways into and out of extremism,” “helps radicalized individuals disengage from extremist movements by supporting both the individual and their family,” and provides consulting and educational services to other organizations “that have a desire to understand, teach, heal, prevent, and counter racism and violent extremism in their communities” (www.lifeafterhate.org). The founders of Life After Hate, former violent extremists, inspire us to be courageous. It takes courage to open our hearts, it takes courage to endure, it takes courage to see the possibility of new life, the ever-present opportunity to overcome, to survive and to flourish. It takes courage and it is wonderfully possible. Our faith inspires us, shows us the way, gives us the courage to “lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

The armor of light...think about opening our hearts to actually hearing another point of view, to listening deeply enough to understand how that view was shaped and so we grasp a kernel of truth. Think about opening our hearts and recognizing the blessings offered to us each day in a kind word, in the grandeur of nature, in our varied skills and experiences which enrich and even save each other’s lives. Think about opening our hearts to the suffering in this world, so that rather than averting our glance we love empathically, offer aide, and perhaps become agents of change.

I wrote in Parish Notes about my experience recently of flipping through the channels and
coming across a re-airing of a concert from December of last year on PBS. I was returning from my vacation in Maine and had stopped for the night along the way in NY. The concert by Il Volo, with special guest Placido Domingo, was a tribute to The Three Tenors. The setting was beautiful, in front of the Basilica Santa Croce in Florence, Italy. Honestly, the music brought me to tears…I was overwhelmed by the wonder that we as human beings are able to create such beauty, soaring music that moves the human heart. While on vacation, I read a great book, *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah – a novel about a family involved in the French Resistance during World War II. I cried my way through the last few chapters so moved by the tragedy of war enveloped around the enduring theme of love lost and found. I hope I’m not giving you the wrong idea…I did not spend my entire vacation crying! I did sit by the ocean and watch the sun set over the horizon and was awed by the majesty of Creation. We can open our hearts to all of life. True, this open-mindedness might be a bit easier while we are on vacation…precisely why community is so important. We come together in faith, to grow in our faith, to live faith-filled lives, to allow our hearts to be moved, to “lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

Let us go boldly into the new program year. There is so much in store…we continue our partnership with EDWINS this coming Saturday with a family work day and celebration of the recent graduates. Our new Director of Youth Ministries will be leading a revitalized and expanded youth ministry program. With parishioners from Olivet Baptist and Forest Hill Presbyterian, we will be reading and discussing *The Book of Joy* by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. A Women’s Spiritual Retreat will be held at River’s Edge in October – the spaces are filling up. Dynamic speakers will be joining us this year, including Bishop Wright from the Diocese of Atlanta and Brian McLaren, who will be speaking about his latest book, *The Great Spiritual Migration*. We are starting Foyer Groups, informal dinner gatherings to
get to know one another better. With a generous grant from the Cleveland Foundation, we are proud to showcase a lineup of renowned artists in a two-week organ festival beginning on September 15th. The 200th Anniversary of the Diocese of Ohio in November will include a Diocesan-wide Eucharist with Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preaching and presiding, and the dedication of Bellwether Farm, the new Diocesan Retreat Center…all of these activities and so much more all emanating from worship, the heart of our faith.

“Wait on the Lord. Be courageous, and he will strengthen your heart.” Let us go boldly into this new program year…with gratitude for all the blessings in this life…with hope for the goodness that will be made manifest in this world…with the courage to be agents of change. Amen.