

# *“Make Your Life Matter”*

**Genesis 37, 1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14, 22-33**

**Part III of VII in the sermon series:**

**“For Such a Time as This:**

**Seven Lessons for Living Through Pandemic Times”**

**Based on Esther 4:14**

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens  
Senior Minister

August 9, 2020

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 9, 2020, The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 14, dedicated to Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi and Anthony Fauci, to the memory of The Rev. Dr. Jack Watson and one of First Church's dearest friends, Jane Makari who passed to eternal life on August 8th and always to the glory of God!

## **“Make Your Life Matter”**

Genesis 37, 1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14, 22-33

Part III of VII in the sermon series:

“For Such a Time as This:

Seven Lessons for Living Through Pandemic Times”

Based on Esther 4:14

Today the third sermon in our series *“For Such a Time as This: Seven Lessons for Living Through Pandemic Times,”* takes a look at how each of your lives really matters. We will do this through the lens of the Dreamer, Joseph and the Redeemer, Jesus. Both the Dreamer and the Redeemer saved lives through their vision of a better world and God's powerful healing touch in daily life. This world needs both dreamers and redeemers. Let's learn from them so that we can become more like them.

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

It is challenging and death defying to be a dreamer and a redeemer. If you don't believe me – ask Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi and Anthony Fauci. Chances are you only know Dr. Fauci's name. He has been the Director of the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases since 1984. He is known and respected worldwide as one of the top experts on pandemics and infectious diseases. Patrisse, Alicia and Opal are the founders of the Black Lives Matter Network which is a global network established in 2013 to advocate and protest against racial discrimination. BLM is very decentralized by design. It is truly grassroots but it calls for all people who stand together to be strengthened by diversity, empathy, restorative justice and intergenerationality.

These three women and this one man have stood for truth and integrity and have stood face-to-face with hate groups online and on the streets to demand that we save lives and create a world free of COVID-19 and anti-Blackness.

In listening to Dr. Fauci throughout this pandemic, I have been moved by his consistent and unwavering focus on the virus and what we must do to flatten the curve of its spread. Washing hands thoroughly and regularly, social distancing, masks and facial coverings, widespread testing, and contact tracing are all clear and measurable, achievable measures to beat down COVID-19. Of course, we need a vaccine. However, if we followed what the expert,

Dr. Fauci says, we would not be the worst-case nation in the world for the spread of this disease.

From the President on down, we have heard confusing and frankly chaotic and distressingly messed-up messages, bizarre excuses, conspiracy theories of truly insane origin, and militant resistance to proven scientific evidence based on honest, transparent, clear and direct information. This has exacerbated a national economic crisis and the created a vast spread of COVID-19 in ways and places where it never needed to happen. With 250,000 bikers from all around in South Dakota this weekend, we will see – yet again – the spiking and spreading of the Coronavirus in new directions and devastating new ways. In a press conference last week, Governor DeWine showed how one man worshipping with COVID-19 in a church service in Ohio spread the disease to AT LEAST 91 other people covering five counties in one week. Folks, this is a clear example of why it is so dangerous to be together in worship right now.

If we had ALL listened to Dr. Fauci and followed the simple steps of hand washing, masking, social distancing, testing and tracing we might be together in our beautiful cathedral of grace. Anthony Fauci believes that your life matters and so do I – that is why we are continuing to hold virtual services. Like all of you, I don't like it one bit. But I love you and I don't want you to die to be here. Your health and safety matter most of all to me and our church.

As for the most significant social movement of this generation, Black Lives Matter was the vision of three women to dig their heels in the streets to declare that we need a world free of anti-Blackness. We need a world where every Black person has the social, economic and political power to thrive. In their efforts to combat racism, Patrisse,

Alicia and Opal have drawn millions of people worldwide into their movement. Their cause is my cause and the cause of many, now. We have to change Racists into Anti-Racists. We have to make it crystal clear that Black Lives Matter and set up structures of economic justice, social justice and political justice which makes these truths “self-evident.”

There are a number of people who cry out “All Lives Matter” in our times. I believe some who do this are genuinely wanting to say to let’s make the world better for everyone. But I also believe that there are many who are not genuine in this response. They are seeking to silence the cries of those who have literally and figuratively have felt the whip of discrimination for 401 years. Ayana Lage says it this way, “No one is saying that your life doesn’t matter. What we are saying is that all lives can’t matter until Black Lives Matter.”

Sonya Renee Taylor, author and founder of “the Body is Not an Apology,” likens it to your wife asking you if she’s pretty and you responding, “all people are pretty.” That will not go over well with your wife or anyone else in your life who heard you say that. What she needs in that moment is to hear you say something about her – not something vague and innocuous about all people. Do you see what I mean?

Here’s another way to put it...if someone cries out and points to a neighbor’s house - “*their house is on fire!*” and the fire department comes and puts out the flames, imagine you saying, “*What about my house? My house matters too.*” And the firefighters respond, “*your house is not on fire.*” And you say, “*But my house is important.*” Let’s put out the fire first. That’s what matters.

What about making your life matter in these pandemic times – times when we are fighting at least a three-front war – Viral, Racist, and Economic. What lessons can we learn from our texts today?

Our texts today give us two great stories of two great men – Joseph, Jacob’s son, and Jesus, Joseph’s son. Each is chosen by God at a pivotal point in their people’s history to save their nation. Each is favored by a father and jealously judged by brothers and other men. One grows to greatness out of the strife in the family of his father – the great patriarch of Canaan. One grows to greatness out the strife and conflict in the Roman Empire and Jewish community of 1st century Palestine. One is the interpreter of dreams. The other is the fulfillment of dreams. Each is a central part of the epic story of Jewish and Christian scriptures.

Each one makes his life matter.

Genesis 37:1 begins a story that will ultimately end the book of Genesis, 13 chapters later. Joseph’s story is so rich in color and imagery that it remains one of the most vivid in the Hebrew scriptures.

*“The theology of the passage is hidden in that there are no moral conclusions placed before us. In fact, God is not even named in the passage. But those who read this story to the end, will be impressed that things would have turned out much differently for Joseph (and for Israel) had it not been for the watchful care of the One who brought Israel into being.”* (Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching*, p. 434).

This narrative introduces us to Joseph and his half-brothers, who had a different mother. It is clear that Jacob favors Rachel, and her son, Joseph. Through this favoritism, we are also introduced to Harem

intrigue – a common fact of life in ancient Near East culture – as jealousy is passed on from mothers (less favored) to sons (also less favored). Protected by Dad, because of his youth and his favored status, the dream interpreter with the “coat of many colors” is drawn out of the tent and into the desert by his half-brothers.

Away from the shelter of his father’s delight, Joseph is thrown into a waterless pit by his 10 half-brothers (Benjamin appears to be either very young or not yet born). The intention is to kill Joseph, but thanks to Reuben’s intervention, Joseph’s life is spared because most certainly death awaited him in the desert pit. He is sold to Ishmaelites (remember “Ishmael” the first son of Abraham? These are his progeny saving Issac’s progeny – quite ironic. Joseph’s distant half-cousins save his life while his half-brothers seek to destroy him). He is carried off to Egypt as a slave.

There is another delicious irony in this for the readers because we discover that by sparing Joseph’s life, Jacob and the families of his eleven sons are ultimately spared later in Genesis by Joseph when their enslaved brother becomes a powerful leader of Egypt. But that is not today’s story.

Today, I can see Joseph reaching up from the pit of despair and grasping the hand of his Ishmaelite brother who pulls him to the safety of slavery from the dangers of death in the pit. Given a second chance, Joseph, under the guidance of God, will save Egypt AND Israel!

Talk about a life that matters! Joseph’s life really matters as he saves one family and two nations in one lifetime.

**Out of the pit and onto the water!**

Thousands of years later and a couple hundred miles away on the largest body of fresh water in the land of Israel, another storm is brewing. Matthew's Gospel takes us to the stormy Sea of Galilee. There, "The son of God" walks on water, invites Peter to join him in water-walking, catches Peter as he sinks into the water, teaches trust and true faith and calms the sea.

Amid the pressures of his transformational ministry, the story begins with Jesus needing time away from the crowds and the disciples to pray. While the disciples go out in the boat (after all - they are mostly fishermen!), Jesus goes up on the mountain. During the night, he is alone in prayer and they end up fighting for their lives in a storm on the Sea of Galilee.

As the morning dawns, Jesus walks across the water to the boat – the disciples, needless to say, are a bit freaked out. He offers them reassurance that it is he, Jesus, not a ghost, who is coming to them. He tells them to have no fear. Peter steps up and says, "*Since it is you, command me to walk on the water with you!*" Peter knows that whatever Jesus commands, Jesus makes possible. Jesus bids Peter, "*Come.*"

Out jumps Peter ONTO the water! Peter seems fine on his first step across the water, but the wind blows up and he goes down, crying for Jesus to save him. Pulling his #1 disciple out of the waves, Jesus proclaims, "*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*"

It is at this point we pause to reflect on the meaning of these judging words of Jesus. I love Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic analysis of Peter's response found in *The Cost of Discipleship* (pp. 53-60). Bonhoeffer wrote:

*Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he never would have learned the meaning of faith . . . The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if people imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics.*

Bonhoeffer goes on to draw the theological paradox that emerges from this scene: *“Only the one who believes is obedient, and only the one who is obedient believes.”*

In other words, had Peter stayed in the boat and not taken the first step, his faith would have been worthless. By stepping out of the boat, Peter’s faith is tried and true. None of us can follow Jesus without taking a step of faith and being obedient to his call to *“Come and follow me.”*

When the wind picks up and Peter drops down, we need to remember that this is not a story of a skeptic who habitually doubts, but a faithful follower who becomes overwhelmed by the circumstances surrounding him. He begins to lose his nerve when the odds are stacked against him, trusting at that point in his Savior to save him. The steady, delivering hand of Jesus pulls Peter out of the water as Peter reaches out and grabs hold.

To make your life matter, you have to raise your hand – like Joseph in the Pit in reaching out to the Ishmaelites and Peter in the Sea reaching up to Jesus. If you don’t reach out and reach up, if you don’t take a risk you will never learn the meaning of trust and the meaning of faith. The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. It passes through trust in God – that when you reach out God will reach back.

You have to say, “*My Life Matters.*” You have to believe that your life is valuable. You have to believe that you are here for a reason. You have to believe that you can make a difference. You have to believe. You also have to reach out and reach up to God for help in these times.

2020 has been a dreadfully awful year in so many ways. Yet, in this year, I seen babies born into loving families. I have seen people come together to battle a Virus and horrific Racial and Economic Injustices. I have seen people reach out to one another and reach up to God in simple and magnificent ways.

Could we do better? Yes. But we are also finding ways to connect when we are apart. I am blown-away by the creativity, the ingenuity and the vision of dreamers and redeemers who seek to make us healthy and keep us well. I am blown away by the little things people do to be kind and reach up and reach out when they are simply struggling to get through each day.

Each one of your lives matters – to me – and to God. No matter what you are up against, you are not alone. You are never alone. If you find yourself in a pit – reach out and reach up. If you find yourself sinking in despair - reach out and reach up. If you find yourself filled with the Spirit of God and a hopefulness and vision to repair the broken pieces of our world – connect with others who are reaching out and reaching up. They need you to get through these times. You may be where they are someday. Then you will need them more than you know now.

Your life really matters – now and always. Thanks be to God.  
Amen.