

# *“Press on to Make it Your Own”*

**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46**

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From the Pulpit

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A Communion meditation delivered the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 4, 2020, the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, World Communion Sunday and St. Francis' Saint's Day, dedicated on National COVID-19 Remembrance Day to all the men, women, teens, and children across the globe who have tested positive for COVID-19, to all who survived and all who have died since December 2019, to Tom Gies on the death of his mother, and Lauren Muscott on the death of her grandmother, to Ed Koetz, our longest consecutive member on his birthday October 5th and always to the glory of God!

**“Press on to Make it Your Own”**

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

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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.

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The Ten Commandments, the Wicked Tenants and good fruit-bearing seekers of God and the call to Spiritual Maturity in following Christ greet us in scripture on this World Communion Sunday. Coupled with our National COVID-19 Remembrance Day in which we are called to remember the 7,310,625 million people who

have tested positive, including 301,539 in the last seven days (now including the President of the United States, First Lady, and other key leaders in the White House and Republican Party) and more than 208,118 who have died (including Gina Harris and Carl Miller and many others we can name in our own lives), we find ourselves challenged and likely to tune-out and turn-off worship and the news.

But today is also St. Francis of Assisi's Saint's Day. In his memory, I press on remembering his words: *"Start by doing what is necessary, then by doing what is possible and suddenly you are doing the impossible."* Also, I call you in his saintly name to *"Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words."*

Allow me to say a few words about each of the texts and then sit down. That will be my gift to all of you today – in memory of little saintly friend and every creature on earth's favorite saint.

**Exodus 20:1-17 is God's gift of Ten Commandments for humanity.** God gives the law to Moses as a way to structure society, ethics and moral codes. Here are God's top ten list – in case you weren't listening earlier when they were read.

These are God's Top Ten – 1. Put God first - only God. 2. Don't put other god images or desire other kinds of gods. 3. Don't misuse or abuse God's name. God doesn't like irreverent use of God's name. 4. Keep the Sabbath Day Holy. Work six days -not seven. You need to rest on the 7th day (like God did).

5. Honor your father and your mother. 6. No murder. 7. No adultery. 8. No stealing (including elections). 9. No lies about your neighbor. 10. No lusting after your neighbor's house – don't set your heart on anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Martin Luther referred to these Ten Commandments as the greatest gift of God's Grace. Later, he called the Beatitudes the greatest gift of God's Law to Love. This flips the script on these two powerful texts. But Luther believed God's Law to be Grace and God's Grace was God's Law.

Interestingly, Moses receives the tablets of God's laws on the mountaintop of Sinai and when he brings them down to the people, they are already sinning boldly. He smashes God's chiseled word and they become shards of grace, fragments of truth. God never speaks of this act by Moses. God's silence at the crushing of the law is so fascinating, it would take at least another sermon to unpack. For today, let us remember that God has always maintained silence about the crushing of the law. We need to listen to the silence of God. In the spirit of St. Francis and Martin Luther, may we live fully into to the ten commandments – God's greatest gift of grace to all of us – for all generations.

In Matthew we encounter the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. As with all the parables, it begins "*there was a man . . . (in this case) who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it and built a watchtower . . .*" Seemingly more allegorical than parabolic, this story twists, turns, and finally ends with a judgment on people who produce bad fruit and blessing on people who produce good fruit - that is - the fruit of the kingdom of God!

**In the end, our storyteller celebrates the joy of good fruit – which we can all get behind. After all, everyone prefers good fruit to bad fruit.**

Everyone wants to identify with the joy of "good fruit" people! We all want to believe we are in the community of the blessed, the right

church, the right group in the right church and so much more. But the story doesn't say that membership in the "right" community will automatically place you among the joy-filled people producing "the fruit of the kingdom of God!" Does it?

This story, delivered from the heart of an early Christian community squabbling with the synagogues down the street (and across the Mediterranean Sea), makes no guarantees that Christians are granted special entrance into the kingdom of God. In fact, it makes no promises of the coming Kingdom of God to Christians at all. It is not a story about good Christians and disobedient Jews or renegade pagans.

Rather, as the "owner of the vineyard," (Read: "our God") is expecting Good fruit growing out of righteous living, human caring and courageous witnessing. We desire to be God's good fruit in these times - but it is not as simple as it seems – unless like William J. Toms has written: *"We live like the only Bible that some person will ever read."* Let our actions speak louder than our words.

Finally, the Apostle Paul gives us a gift in Philippians 3 today. Paul is calling us to the Church in Philippi and for all of us to "know Christ." He wants us to lay aside the righteousness of our own accomplishments in favor of the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. He wants us to stop talking about ourselves and focus on Jesus. Paul accomplishes nothing alone. All the goodness of the Gospel comes from God. All Righteousness belongs to God. Anyone who accomplishes anything never gets there by themselves. That is true for faith. It is true for life. It is true for all the work we do.

There is a story about President Kennedy visiting NASA back in the early days of our space program. As he entered the building, he stopped to meet one of the custodians. He asked him what his job was. The man answered, “I am going to the moon,” to which President Kennedy smiled and said, “me too.” This is a great example of Paul’s point – all of us working together for a singular purpose.

Washing hands, social distancing, wearing masks may seem like flying to the moon for some of us as we battle COVID-19. But unless we do this together, this spaceship will never leave the launchpad and we will continue to see rising numbers of sickness and death. Let us hope and pray that our President and First Lady are not among those who don’t make through this pandemic. If we have learned anything in 2020, we should all agree that the COVID-19 virus is really good at what it does. We have to be equally good in what we do or we will lose the battle to this deadly coronavirus.

Paul acknowledges that he has not yet arrived at the goal of following Christ. The real Goal he says is “resurrection of the dead” – connecting for eternity with all those who have gone before us – starting with Jesus Christ. To reach this goal we need to walk with God all the way. We need to practice generosity, kindness, grace and love. He calls this **spiritual maturity**.

How do you and I reach spiritual maturity? In the words of Paul, we need to “press on to make this faith our own.” This can’t simply be your mother or grandmother’s faith. It can’t simply be your father’s or your grandfather’s faith. It has to be yours. You have to own this for yourself.

We don’t get to be a Christian based on what others have done. We have established ourselves as people of faith. What I say to all

confirmands throughout their journey, *“This is about you. This is your connection. This is your choice. This is how you pray, how you live, how you speak and act right and justly. It is not your mom or dad. It is you. Make this faith your own.”*

**In summary, follow God’s top ten. Be “good fruit” people. And press on to make this faith your own.**

On this World Communion Sunday – like none other we have ever held – come to God’s table of grace on tip-toe. Do not step forward in any self-righteous arrogance. Say to yourself, “I made it here today by the grace of God.” Come, seeking to be joyful fruit-bearers for God’s Kingdom. But, as you do, come knowing that good fruit is borne by righteous living, human caring, and courageous witnessing - not by wishful thinking.

As you come to the table today, pause to consider all those who won’t be making it here today – those who have died, those who have no access to God’s table and the bread of life, all of our sisters and brothers across the globe and across the street who won’t be joining us today in spite of the truth that Jesus Christ, the founder of this feast, welcomes every child of God to his table of grace.

Remember that. Remember him. Amen.