

# *“For Our Children”*

Exodus 33:12-23, I Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, dedicated to my grandchildren, Benton, Rylan, Emryn and Ethan, to G. Dene Barnard and Jackie Dean on their birthdays, to Tracy Najeras and her incredible team at Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) Ohio as they lead a mission to care for the all the children of Ohio, to The Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson as he steps into leadership as the Executive Director of CDF, to Dr. Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and Emerita Director of CDF, and to all the children of the world who have spent much of the last year showing us how to live through, grow through and love through the Pandemic of COVID-19 and always to the glory of God!

**“For Our Children”**

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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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**Christmas came on October 3rd this year.** October 3 was like no other day I have experienced during the pandemic of 2020. It was the day I was able to hold my - “newborn” – 5 ½ month old granddaughter Emryn Renee Ahrens, for the very first time she was

in my arms. It was also the day when I was able to hug my grandsons Benton Myles and Rylan Antonio for the first time since February.

168 days had passed since Emryn was born. 218 days had passed since I had held onto my beloved grandsons – who Susan and I had spent every other Friday with for the first years of their lives – Benton 5 ¼ and Rylan 3 ½. I had seen Emryn from a social distance since her birth, but we had not been closer than six feet. As for the boys, we had played together on Zoom and in person, we had hiked together, played games and read books outside together, sat down and shared stories and snacks – but all with masks – all from 6 feet and beyond.

It had felt like an eternity any way you cut it. We were following the CDC directives and more importantly, Emmy's pediatrician's guidelines. We were being "safe" and "good." But, being safe and good never felt so bad.

On Christmas Morning - October 3 - I jumped out of bed (well as much as am able to jump with my new hip). I showered, got dressed and Susan and I headed north to Solon, Ohio. When we arrived, Rylan's and Benton's faces were pressed against the living room window. Their bodies were bouncing for joy. They had welcomed us that same way for months. But this time would be different. Those faces - which light up my heart every time I see them - would soon be close. This time, their faces would be next to mine. This time, our hands would hold onto each other. This time, we would embrace and they would sit on my lap and in my arms like they had had since the first days of their lives. And as for my beautiful granddaughter – well I was about to fly over the moon and back!

As we came up the driveway, Benton came running out to meet us. I was first up the driveway. He came running toward me, waved, took a left turn and shot right past me. He ran into the waiting arms of his grandmother and they held on to each other. They are so close. It was beautiful to behold.

Then came the “little man” - Rylan. He ran into my arms, held me tight and said, “Pop Pop, don’t let me go.” So, I held him like I would never let him go. Then about 10 seconds later, he smiled and said, *“I love you. I’m good now.”* And off he went to his grandmother’s arms.

As for my firstborn granddaughter, well, that’s a whole ‘nother story! As she sat on my lap, we looked into each other’s eyes and my heart completely melted. She couldn’t see the wide smile that we beaming under my mask and into her beautiful eyes. But she could see my tear-soaked face. I basked in the love and light of that beautiful October morning with the most beautiful girl in the world. In total contentment we sat together in the warm October sun— she and I. She held my fingers. I cradled her in my arms. We were in love. It was better than I ever imagined. Christmas had come in October.

All across Ohio, America and the world, Christmas has been arriving on different days over the past 11 months. I’ve actually seen it in my neighborhood sometimes as we come close again to the people we love most in our lives. Yet, I know that too many of us are still waiting for Christmas to come. To that point – I haven’t held any of my own adult children in over 7 ½ months. I am still waiting for Christmas to come with them!

Here at First Church many babies have been born who I haven't seen or held. Our children and grandchildren are growing up and I yearn to see them, hug them, and talk with them about their lives.

For the past 32 Sundays, you see have seen me, Emily, Mr. Mark, and sometimes Kevin (you always get to hear him). But we don't see you. Although some of us have spent almost 21 years in each other's presence, most all of us have now spent 224 days apart. How I long to see you again, to hug you, to hear your voice, to be in your presence. And I truly miss the newborns, the infants, the toddlers, the young children, the teens, and the young adults who are changing and growing so fast that I miss them mightily as we make our way through these pandemic times.

God didn't create me to be a Virtual Shepherd. I was designed by God to be a Shepherd - by your side – not on your screen. God didn't create you to be a Virtual person either. But, if we can keep together while we are apart through screen time, we can and will endure all of this for the sake of being together again.

All of us are feeling exhaustion and impatience as we let our guards down and in so doing – open ourselves up to a new wave of COVID-19. Over 8 million Americans have tested positive for COVID-19 – over 70,000 new cases on Friday alone. More than 219,000 are now dead. The cases are rising as exhaustion and impatience increases as we move indoors. We have to let endurance and perseverance win over exhaustion and impatience.

**Through it all there is something I know about our children.** They are teaching us how to thrive in the midst of a survival mentality and reality. Jamie Blair (our soloist last Sunday and choral section leader) teaches voice and music in the public schools. She

said something last week that stuck with me about her students. She said, *“the children get this. They are showing us how to get through this. It’s the adults who don’t seem to be able to get it together.”* To which I say, “AMEN!” In what appears to be a role reversal, the children are leading us and showing us how to mask, how to wash our hands, and how to socially distance. Why is that the children are acting like adults and the adults are acting like two-year-old toddlers on their worst “terrible two” days?

We adults could thrive - and not just survive - if we took our cues on thriving from our children. I believe our children show us a better way through their honesty, their sincerity and their trust. Honesty, sincerity and trust are all qualities demonstrated in today’s reading from Exodus 33. Moses is once again in the presence of Almighty God – who is once again and understandably – ready to sever God’s relationship with God’s chosen people.

Moses intervenes. He cries out to God – **SHOW ME YOUR WAY!** He calls upon God to “come clean with me.” He asks God to explain what God is all about. How loyal is God? How forthright is God? God needs to show the people THE Way out of the desert and into the promised land. Not only that, God needs to come forward with the people or they will not move.

Moses then calls God to **SHOW ME YOUR GLORY!** First, show me your way. Then, show me your glory. Moses is a tireless mediator who remains loyal to his people even when they are disloyal to him. They wander away from Moses and God. But Moses stays steadfast to them and demands that God do the same. He also demonstrates tremendous courage to confront God. His courage grows out of a relationship with God. He is honest with God and God responds.

**Finally**, Moses gains God's commitment to move through the madness of wilderness life and head with them to the land of promise. God makes three promises to Moses in the process of moving forward. First, God says, "I will give you rest." Second God says, "*I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.*" Finally, God says, "*I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy.*" **Rest. Grace. Mercy.** If any people in any time are ever going to make it out of hard times – they need rest, grace and mercy from God to lead them through to the other side. We can all use rest, grace, and mercy right now.

**In the end, God's Compassion prevails.**

Rest, Grace, Mercy AND **Compassion** in pandemic times are all keys to thriving. If we are constantly tired and lack grace, mercy and compassion, we will not make it through these times and we will leave many behind. When our children tell their children about this time, let it be said that we rose together and did the right thing together – on behalf of all God's children. When the history of the world is written about this pandemic, I pray that historians will tell about all we did to help our sisters and brothers in need – all we did to help Compassion Prevail.

When I consider our children and compassion needed in these times, I think of Dr. Marian Wright Edelman. Through the years, Dr. Edelman has served our nation's children through the founding and directing of The Children's Defense Fund. In my estimation, no one has fought harder and longer for children's rights and protections than Dr. Edelman. In her beautiful book, *Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors*, she shares many stories of the men and women who mentored her to become who she was. Some of them were iconic champions of social justice through the years. Some were teachers.

Some were friends and fellow sojourners on this planet. Some were children.

In one chapter, “Our Children as Mentors,” she lifts up the lessons she learned from children through the years. She writes, “*Children have taught me to confront unvarnished truth and unpleasant facts I’d often like to avoid... Children have taught me forgiveness... Children have taught me resiliency... Children have taught me wonder and to see the world afresh each day. ... Children teach us that love matters most... Children teach us to be courageous and to stand up against injustice....*” In each case, she tells transformational stories of how children have changed her life. (Marian Wright Edelman, *Lanterns*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1999, pp.136-140).

Although it is true and powerful that children mentor us, Dr. Edelman also calls us as parents to make a pledge to our children. Here it is and encourage you all to take up this pledge today.

### **I pledge to:**

*Listen to my children.*

*Communicate with my children.*

*Teach my children right from wrong and to be a good role model for them.*

*Spend time with them and pay attention to my children.*

*Educate my children in mind, body, and soul.*

*Work to provide a stable family life for my children.*

*Vote for my children to ensure them fair treatment and opportunity.*

*Speak out and stand up for my children’s needs and support effective groups that help children.*

I make this pledge today. I hope you do, too. Whether you have children or not, whether they are small or full grown, I pray that you can pledge to support them and sustain them in these times. There are so many lessons to learn and share today. There are so many ways we can stay tuned in to the voice of God speaking to us through our children.

Today, I pray that like Moses, we take up our case and cause with God. I pray that we call upon God to show us God's Way and to show us God's Glory. I pray that like the Apostle Paul, we learn to acknowledge and celebrate the men and women who delivered us to this day – a day in which we are blessed to praise and glorify God. And I pray, that like Jesus, we may *“Let the little children come unto us”* and see that *“unless we become like the children, we will never enter the Kingdom of God.”*

I also pray that Christmas comes for you during this pandemic. Don't wait for December 25 to open your eyes and receive the gifts that God is giving to you. The gifts are everywhere waiting to be found and to be received and celebrated.

Thanks be to God for all of our children! Amen.