

*“A Reformation Vision for a  
Post-COVID-19 World”*

**Deuteronomy 34:1-12, I Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-46**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 25, 2020, Reformation Sunday, 21st Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to Elijah Dean Coil who was born October 20, 2020 to Anita and Jared Coil and his sister Aria, Pope Francis I, Melissa McFadden, all the reformers throughout time who have changed this world for the better and always to the glory of God!

**“A Reformation Vision for a Post-COVID-19 World”**

Deuteronomy 34:1-12, I Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-46

Today is Reformation Sunday 2020. It is the day we, in the Protestant Christian Tradition, remember the actions of German Monk, Martin Luther, who on October 31, 1517 nailed his Ninety-five Theses or Grievances on the door of the All Saints’ Church in Wittenberg, Germany. It marked the beginning of a movement of Reformed Catholics who are now known as protestants. More than 500 years have passed since that day. Today I would like to lift up Reformers of our times who inspire us still to move the needle, change the status quo and make a difference.

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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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We begin today on a mountaintop cliff overlooking promise.

In Deuteronomy 34, we see Moses for the last time. He has delivered his people Israel to the edge of the land of promise. Although he dies before entering the promise land, Moses had guided them through 40 years in the desert and generations of maturation as a people of faith. When he led their liberation from slavery in Egypt, they numbered 600,000 people. Now 2,000,000 are about to cross the Jordan River to Promised Land.

God takes Moses to Mt. Nebo's peak. From there Moses sees all the future territory. To the North, there is the Gilead range. Dan can be seen 100 miles away to the Northwest. 65 miles to the West is the Mediterranean Sea. To the South and Southeast is the Negeb Desert and the Plain of Jordan 50 miles away. It is if he can see forever.

There is a tenderness in this final scene of Moses' life. Mercy and serenity meet on the mountaintop. The gentle manner in which God deals with the faithful and diligent servant is paradigmatic of God's great mercy, not only towards Moses, but towards Israel. And the serenity with which Moses accepts his own mortality reveals the peace that pervades his heart.

Having seen it all, Moses dies there. He is buried in the Valley of Moab in a place no one knows, so that a shrine may not be constructed. Through all his soaring triumphs and bitter disappointments; public acclaim and private bitterness; Moses dies physically healthy and honored by all his people. The Liberator, the Law Giver, the Reformer – Moses – is gone.

Of Moses, Nobel Peace Laureate and author, Eli Wiesel has written: *Moses is the most solitary and most powerful hero of Biblical history. The*

*immensity of his task and the scope of his experience command our admiration, our reverence, our awe. His passion for social justice, his struggle for national liberation, his triumphs and his disappointments, his poetic inspiration, his gifts as a strategist and organizational genius, his complex relationship with God and with God's people, his condemnations and blessings, his bursts of anger, his silences, his efforts to reconcile the Law with compassion, authority and integrity - no individual ever, anywhere, accomplished so much, for so many people in so many different domains. Moshe Rabbeinu our Master Moses, incomparable and unequalled."* Thanks be to God for Moshe Rabbeinu!

Moses is not the only reformer in our Reformation Day texts.

He is joined by **Joshua Rabbeinu**, Jesus the Rabbi. He is the New Moses who also speaks to us as a Reformer. We find him once again entangled in conflict with the Religious Elite - the Pharisees (having already silenced the Sadducees). The Pharisees are opposed to Jesus – believing he is not God's special agent on earth.

They challenge him at every possible turn. When they try to pin him down with tough questions, Jesus doesn't take off his mike and stomp off stage right. Instead of leaving in a huff, he stands his ground and quotes Moses in Dt. 6:5 and offers the Great Commandment – the Great Shema – *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."* Then he adds the second greatest law, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* from Leviticus 19:18. Loving God is always first. Intertwining your love for yourself and your neighbor is a close second. Then he says, *"on these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."*

(By the way- we need to remember that it was Congregation Tifereth Israel, our sisters and brothers on Broad St., who purchased the first

stone in our Pathway of Justice in the Gladden Social Justice Park. It was Leviticus 19:18 – “*Love your neighbor*”).

Let’s be clear – the first commandment is in fact FIRST! Love God! Nothing else matters without that as our mandate in life. Love God with everything that is in you. AND the second commandment takes its place right behind #1. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. And as we know, if you can’t love yourself in healthy and productive ways, how can you love your neighbor?

**Essentially, Jesus boils down 613 laws to two.** In doing this, he offers a vision for a better world. But, this Reformer of the Levitical and Deuteronomic laws is not done. He has a question for the questioners. “*What do think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?*” They answer that “*He is David’s son.*” Jesus turns this around and points out that David calls him Lord. So, Jesus asks, “*if David calls him Lord, how can he be David’s son?*” The Pharisees don’t have a comeback to this. He shames them into silence. He stumps the so-called stumpers. So, they take off their mikes, throw them down and stomp off. They did not return with any more questions or answers.

Did someone say, “*the Messiah is in the house!?*”

Throughout his ministry, Jesus answered all his critics nose to nose, face to face. He never backs down. He never turns away. He never apologizes for who he is and what he believes about His Relationship with God and our relationships with God.

Jesus is constantly about the work of reforming the laws of Moses. I have always loved that the most quoted passages of scripture in the Christian Scriptures (outside of the Psalms) are passages from Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy, as you know, contains the reforming

law codes of Leviticus and all of Judaism. So, Jesus is the reformer of the reformed laws. Without a doubt, he is the first Reformer of our Faith!

A Reformer is a person who makes changes to a system or a law in order to improve it. A Reformer looks at what is in place and points out where the flaws or inherent biases and prejudices are and goes about changing them.

In our faith tradition, Reformers ask: **What is God doing? Where is God working? What are the signs of the times saying to the church? How will the church respond to these signs of the times?**

All of us should play our part in reforming the systems and institutions of which we are apart. If we sense that something is not right, we need to do more than whine about it. We need to change it.

100 years ago, women and men changed the laws of this land with the 19th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States – giving women the right to vote. The first election in which women voted was in November 1920. Eight million women voted – only 36% of those who were eligible. Many conservative women who opposed the 19th Amendment chose to stay away from the polls. When they saw the effect of their not voting (an abundance of liberals were elected) they showed up the next time. That is the power of the Vote. If you don't show up it effects the outcome often to your displeasure. So - VOTE!

That is how reform works. It is often perceived as helping only a small subset of people, but in fact most reforms float the boats for many people. I have heard it said by Black authors and activists that

White people who oppose reforms because they have been proposed by Black people miss the truth that the reforms actually help – ALL people! A good example is the call for \$15/minimum wage laws. They lift up everyone who is struggling to get by in these times.

Lt. Melissa McFadden is a Reformer. Lt. McFadden has been with the Columbus Division of Police for 24 years and is currently the highest-ranking Black female in the Division's history. In her new memoir just released in September, *Walking the Thin Black Line: Confronting Racism in the Columbus Division of Police*, Lt. McFadden tells her story.

As I have worked closely with Lt. McFadden over the past two years, I can tell you that she has undaunted courage. She is unafraid to speak truth with love to power. Thanks to her tireless work to overcome the racial and gender divisions within our Columbus police, she has shined a light on the racist troubles within the department. But I can also tell you that all the reforms she has called for will affect and strengthen all women officers, all the other minority officers and all LGBTQ officers within the force. Calls for independent inquiries into discriminatory practices within the ranks, intensive mental health care for officers who shot and killed citizens, and community training which brings the community and officers closer together are good for everyone – although they rise out of her experience as a Black female officer on the force.

Interestingly, Mayor Ginther, Ned Pettus, Jr. the Director of Public Safety, and Chief Quinlan have all agreed that all the reforms which have been called for should be met. However, after two years and the rising protests in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in

Minneapolis – five months ago today – they still have to implement three of the seven expectations they so hardily agreed were necessary.

Reform is often slow. But, these seven expectations should have been accomplished by now – and with a lot less resistance. Lt. Melissa McFadden is an amazing woman of God and a courageous warrior for equal rights. We are blessed in Columbus to have such a champion fighting for equality and racial justice.

Reformers come in all ages, races, nationalities, shapes and sizes – and positions of leadership. My favorite Christian reformer is Pope Francis I. Here on Protestant Reformation Sunday is with great joy that I shout out for the Pope – the Bishop of Rome.

I know you are thinking I am excited about his call for Civil Unions for LGBTQ couples. While that is true, that support only gets him and the Catholic Church up to 1995. They are getting closer – but there is still a 25-year gap.

No, I am excited about the encyclical that the Pope released three weeks ago, on October 4, St. Francis' Feast Day. Pope Francis I went to Assisi, Italy to deliver his encyclical entitled, *Fratelli Tutti* which translates from Latin as “*All Brothers (and Sisters).*”

It is written to address a Post-COVID-19 world. Essentially, Pope Francis is calling us to hit the “reset” button and reshape a world which places our care for one another above all else. Drawing on the parable of the “Good Samaritan,” he underscores the responsibility of love for others based on our shared **Ubuntu** – which translates as a quality that emphasizes our human virtues, compassion and common humanity. It draws on love that builds a universal fraternity

beyond considerations of its recipients' status, gender, origin or location (107, 121).

He challenges unbridled capitalism and the market economy, reiterates that the death penalty is inadmissible and condemns populist, narcissistic leaders who are concerned with their own personal popularity over the common good.

Sr. Simone Campbell said that many of the themes are particularly salient in the face of our US presidential election and legislative gridlock. *‘Pope Francis is sending a simple but jarring message to our world: We must move beyond continuous divisiveness and come together to build a world worthy of all God’s children.’* Sr. Simone, executive director of Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, and founder of Nuns on the Bus, continues, *‘His words are an indictment on rampant individualism, ‘got-you’ politics and economic exploitation.’*

South African Jesuit Priest, theologian and president of the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar, Fr. A. E. Orobator reflects on Pope Francis’ connections to all Africans and to all the people of the earth. He writes, *‘Pope Francis’ words echo the spirit and purpose of the “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.”* This saying exists in variant forms in Southern Africa’s bantu languages and translates as: *“A person is a person through other persons”* or *“I am because we are.”*

3291 years after Moses looked over to the Promised Land and there died and was buried on Mt. Negeb, 1987 years after Jesus reformed the law codes of Moses, 503 years after a monk in Wittenberg called the church and world to change, 100 years after women voted for the first time in America, four weeks after a police lieutenant revealed a terrible story of racism within the ranks of the Columbus police

and called for it to end, three weeks after a Pope called for Post-COVID-19 unity and reformation of our global economic system, all of us of all ages are being called to be reformers where we live, where we interact, and in the places and with the people where we can influence change.

How can you make a change where you are? Guided by the mercy and serenity of God and Moses, by the conviction and focus of Jesus, by the powerful drive for justice and equality of the Suffragists, by the compassion of Melissa and the unity of the Spirit of Francis, I pray that we will do everything in our power to create and deliver a vision for a post-COVID-19 world – one which is more merciful, more compassionate, more unified, and more loving. Amen.