

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 26, 2008, dedicated to the five new members who join today and their families, and always to the glory of God!

## **“On the Edge of Promise”**

***Dt. 34:1-12; Mt. 22:34-46***

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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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With 10 days to go before the 2008 election, candidates across America are all standing on the edge of promise – the promise of hoped-for victories. Throughout their campaigns, all the candidates have been making promises to us. Each has promised to be a man or woman of integrity, honesty, honor and strong leadership. They all promise to be the one we have been waiting for in their elected office. Each promises to change the broken system for which they are running to be a part of.

Ironically, as the We Believe Ohio Anti-Sleaze Campaign has noted, all too many of these promises of integrity and leadership are made while slinging mud at one’s opponent. Political parties and special interest groups are adding to the mess of distortions of the truth by publishing and distributing negative ads that confuse both the electorate and the issues themselves. In a front page article in today’s *Columbus Dispatch*, Mark Naymik, a writer for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reports:

*The Ohio Republican Party mailed a flier this week that*

*misrepresents Senator Obama's relationship to William Ayers, a one-time member of the Weather Underground, an anti government group responsible for bombings in the 1970s, including one at the Pentagon .*

*A Democratic-leaning special-interest group, Bring Ohio Back, sent voters a flier featuring a picture of battered woman and including the false charge that McCain doesn't support certain women's issues and the Violence Against Women Act (The Columbus Dispatch, p.4, 10/26/08).*

I tip my hat to the men and women who run sleaze-free campaigns. It is sad to say, but the lack of sleaze or a minimal amount of sleaze is reason enough to vote for someone because the long-lasting effect of sleaze on the candidates turned legislators is significant.

In the presidential race, we have heard promises of lower taxes and no taxes; jobs for the jobless and underemployed; better schools and better health care and a variety of plans to solve our economic woes. Periodically, we even hear promises to end the misconstrued and often mismanaged 6-year-old war in Iraq while escalating the 7-year-old war in Afghanistan, even though the pollsters tell the candidates the war is not what people want to hear promises about. Consequently, we hear fewer and fewer promises and plans to end the war.

We also are hearing promises of a fair election for all the nation. These promises are hard to hear while here in Ohio lawsuits are being filed against our secretary of state at the same time she has faced death threats this week. I might add, that our secretary of state, Jennifer Brunner, and her family were once members of First Church and Jennifer was a church school teacher here.

Meanwhile, the pollsters and political pundits also are promising they have the inside track on who the winner and the loser will be in the race between Obama and McCain. If we follow their predictions,

the election is either over and Obama should already be declared victorious or it is a dead-heat and either candidate can win, which is actually the news we should be promised at this point.

**Promises from the promising in a nation full of promise show little promise of all coming true.** But one thing is true. I promise you, in 11 days, the presidential campaign of 2008, which started in mid-2006, will be mostly (maybe completely) finished. In an election cycle that has seen billions of dollars spent to hear the promises of only a few thousand American politicians, this is promising news!

In today's texts from Deuteronomy and Matthew, we are given insight into true leadership and genuine promise. From the scripture, we hear the promises of God spoken by the Holy Bible's two finest leaders – Moses and Jesus. In their words and actions, we are shown what is good and true, by a merciful and peaceful God.

In Deuteronomy 34:1-12, the Pentateuch – that is, the first five books of the Bible – come to a close with this story of Moses. Standing on the edge of the Promised Land, having led his people (from the age of 80-120 no less), through the desert, God leads Moses to the peak of Mt. Pisgah. There he can see promise as far as his dimming eyes can focus. He is shown the land sworn to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Although he sees promise, he will never enter the Promised Land. Having finally seen the land flowing with milk and honey, Moses lays down and dies. After much weeping and mourning, and a burial in an undisclosed location, the era of Moses ends and the era of Joshua's leadership begins.

All of this happens literally by “the mouth of the Lord.” God reclaims Moses' soul by kissing him and welcoming him mercifully and peacefully into eternity. Our God who breathed life into Adam in the first chapter of scripture, now lovingly and painlessly reclaims Moses as the Pentateuch closes.

By not crossing into the land of promise, we may wonder if Moses dies unfulfilled. We know he is physically healthy and his eyes are

clear and his voice is strong. But does this solitary and powerful biblical hero die unfulfilled? The text doesn't tell us. Instead, we see his end through God's eyes. Like two old friends ascending the mountaintop for one last time, God and Moses spend the leader of Israel's last moments alone and together. Moses really matters to God. He has been the strong deliverer. Now, his work is done and he may rest in peace.

With his passing, the mantle of leadership is passed to Joshua who is filled with the spirit of wisdom and does what the Lord requires. And in the very next chapter, Joshua 1, the new leader guides God's people into the Promised Land.

This passage reminds me so much of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last sermon in which he proclaimed, "I have been to the mountaintop and I have seen the other side. I may not get there with you, but you will enter the Promised Land."

Faith is more a relay race than a singular journey. We run the race and pass the baton to the next leader and the next generation. What excites me today about the historic race of Barack Obama is that we have reached the place in our country's history that a biracial leader can ascend to the office of president of the United States of America. Whether he wins or loses, this candidacy is remarkable. In the midst of the race, we miss the promise of a race in which Senator Hillary Clinton ran, too. The promise and the hope that each candidate engendered in 2008 must not be forgotten.

And more often than not, it is the race that matters most. With the close of Deuteronomy, we see that it is nothing short of a miracle that Moses has led his people out of slavery and all the way to the Promised Land. It took 10 plagues to get out of Egypt and it took 40 years to get Egypt out of the people, but nevertheless they have arrived as we come to the end of Deuteronomy.

In Dt. 34, we discover how much Moses matters to God. In Matthew 22:34-40, we find out what really matters most to God. Of

the 613 laws of Moses written down in the Pentateuch we just closed, Jesus is asked by the Pharisees, which laws matter most. In his usual brilliant way, Jesus breaks it down. He answers, **“The greatest commandment is this: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . and the second is like it - you shall love your neighbor as yourself . . . Upon these two laws are built all the law of the prophets.”**

To fail to live out the second commandment while claiming to love God doesn't work. Love of God is demonstrated by love of neighbor. To promise to love God while not loving one's neighbor is false advertising and is a lie.

But, while the two commandments are inseparable neither one is absorbed into the other. When we discover the decisive mandate to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, this does not mean that we love God any less. There are many atheists and humanists who live their love for neighbor in ways that far exceed many Christians and Jews. But the first commandment is still the first commandment. We must love God with everything that is in us. God remains the ultimate point of reference for human life. Prayer, public and private worship, the aggressive search for truth about God, and seriously wrestling with issues of faith, are essential to the nurture of our ultimate point of reference.

As we go through our daily lives, our love of God – with everything in us – will lead us to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is our total approach to life and daily faith. As we stand on the edge of promise today, let us live our lives for God, as we experience and come to understand God. I will say this is different for every single one of us. We all encounter and experience God in different ways. I pray that as we do, we will come to more fully embrace our neighbor and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Amen.

