

# “Constitutional Grace”

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

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens  
Senior Minister

October 8, 2023

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>

## “Constitutional Grace”

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

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 8, 2023, The 19th Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to the team who worked on the revisions of the First Church Constitution, to Karen Mozenter and all my friends at JFS, to all the people of Israel and Palestine embattled today, to John Pribble and Betsy Zahn who entered eternal life on Wednesday October 4 and Thursday, October 5, and to Pat Groseck who battles for her life in Mt. Carmel Hospital Grove City, Ohio and always to the glory of God!

+++++

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

+++++

Looking at our Hebrew Scripture text from Exodus 20, generally referred to as The Ten Commandments and writing in the Christian Century, pastor, theologian and author, Liz Cooledge Jenkins, poses a critical question:

**“How do we build something different?”**

She continues, “Many of us find ourselves asking this question. It has become clear that current structures, systems, mindsets, practices, and theologies are not working, and we want to make a change. But too often we unintentionally rebuild different-looking versions of the same broken

systems, the same corrupt hierarchies. We recognize that we need deeper change, but we are not always sure what to do with this recognition.” (*In an uncertain, murky time, God gives the people a gift: ten laws,*” Liz Cooledge Jenkins, *Christian Century*, October 2, 2023 issue).

Audre Lorde famously wrote, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” How do we bring new tools into play – tools that, in Lorde’s words, “enable us to bring about genuine change”?

I imagine the Israelites wrestled with questions like these as they wandered in the desert. It was a liminal space: no longer in Egypt, but not yet in the promised land. No longer eating the food of Pharaoh, but not yet farming and herding for themselves – and, in the meantime, subsisting on miraculously provided water, quail, and manna. No longer forcefully subjected to Egyptian laws, but not yet having laws of their own. No longer enslaved, but not yet sure exactly what freedom looks like (Ibid).

Then, in this uncertain, murky time, God gives the people a gift: ten laws. In a lecture on the Ten Commandments to Bethany Lutheran Church in Ishpeming, Michigan, October 9, 2007, Dr. Walter Brueggemann refers to the ten laws as guidelines for a constructive neighborhood.

He says the first three commandments face the anxiety that people carry and teach people that God is good. God is reasonable. These laws are all about adding Gods’ support to our projects. And because God is Holy, we can’t abuse this gift or this trust.

The second set of six teach people that the only thing to break power of anxiety – is enormous abundance. Generosity overwhelms anxiety. Neighbors are entitled to ultimate respect and neighbors are to be honored.

Finally in the tenth commandment, God is requiring people to serve one another. This is established to prevent people from abusing one another.

In *Journey to the Common Good*, Walter Brueggemann summarizes the heart of the ten laws similarly: First, love and trust YHWH, “rather than Pharaoh’s security system” (commandments 1–3). Second, embrace sabbath rest as “an alternative to aggressive anxiety” (4). Third, recognize that “neighbors, all kinds of neighbors, are to be respected and protected and not exploited” (5–9); and finally, “limit . . . acquisitiveness,” particularly “predatory practices and aggressive policies that make the little ones vulnerable to the ambitions of the big ones” (10).

**The ten laws are all about God teaching God’s community of faith how to live together with one another and with neighbors.**

Remember, the people of Israel have been brutally dehumanized for 400 long years. And so even as God liberates them, God also affirms their humanity and invites them into ways of being that continually affirm one another’s humanity. God calls them to rehumanize one another – by trusting God to provide abundantly for all, by respecting one another, by resting, by being content, and by refusing to kill, steal, cheat, or lie (Ibid).

Many years later, the psalmist will sing, “*The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul*” (Ps. 19:7). For souls wounded from 400 years of collective trauma and likely wondering what healing might look like, I imagine God’s laws feeling like a balm in Gilead.

These refreshing, communally oriented commandments – this gift of guidance from a God who shows the people over and over again that they are not abandoned – do not decrease the agency of the people of Israel but honor it at every turn (Ibid).

They are not decrees from on high, demanding mindless submission. They are not moralizing standards meant to cause division between those who follow them perfectly and everyone else whom the perfect ones look down on. **They are guidelines for human flourishing** – given by a God who says, as a way

of preparing the people to receive the commandments, *“I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself”* (Exod. 19:4). A God who wants the people to be God’s own “treasured possession” (19:5). A God who empowers the recently enslaved desert wanderers to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:6).

Today, God’s laws not only serve as guidelines for holistic, transformative human flourishing, but they also help us discern how to engage with other sorts of authorities. Desmond Tutu saw this clearly in his anti-apartheid activism. “When a clash occurs between the laws of man and the laws of God,” Tutu writes in *God Is Not a Christian*, *“then for the Christian there can be no debate or argument about which they must obey.”* He goes on to urge, *“Please let us be mindful of the important distinction between what is legal and what is morally right”* (Ibid). ***Amen!***

In case you are not aware, Ohio is in the midst of a Clash – a Constitutional Clash – which will be resolved at the polls. I am calling all of you to vote on or before November 7th as part of resolving this clash. At the heart of it all, Issue #1 is calling us to decide whether or not women, people, families have the right to decide what they will do, and how they will act in relation to their pregnancies, their bodies, and themselves. Currently, the laws put in place since Dodds overturned *Roe vs. Wade* in our Supreme Court, are highly restrictive. If you are raped (no matter what age or condition), if you have an unwanted pregnancy, if you have a medically dangerous or questionably viable pregnancy, or even if you have miscarried, you must carry each pregnancy – under all conditions to full term.

Ohio’s current laws are inhumane and unjust. The government has no place deciding for you how such troubled pregnancies should go. I believe these decisions should be the decisions of the person facing these tough and troubling circumstances – no matter what those conditions are. To honor these beliefs, I am voting Yes on Issue #1. Passing ISSUE #1 is a form of Constitutional Grace.

This is near and dear to my heart – as you know. You may also know that I have been featured in a 30-second ad that has run statewide for the past few days on networks and platforms everywhere. In the ad, I speak to these beliefs – based on my 38 years of pastoral experience with families facing really difficult decisions. The ad was sent to you yesterday – so you can see what it says. I am profoundly grateful for the supportive responses from you. My favorite of all coming from my dog groomer. It was so sweet.

But, mostly for the last four days I have taken an unrelenting pounding from the religious right and self-identified Catholics. I have been called many names and had scripture quoted to me about my being a horrible person, a horrible faith leader for leading people astray from their version of the Truth. In more than 46 negative communications, I have been told I was going to hell many times and told I am a baby hater and baby killer – and that God will judge me and send me to hell – for supporting women’s reproductive rights. Early this morning, I was told I should be stripped of the title of Reverend because no reverend is a baby killer.

I have read each communication and taken stock of their concerns. All of this hate and vitriol is pointed at me – and all of it is in the name of God. I want to be clear about something – a number of you are genuinely concerned about the church building and our congregation. There have been no threats to our building or to you. They are clearly focused on me.

Let me share a few thoughts before wrapping up and sitting down. First, as the only Ohio religious leader in these ads, I feel alone in this effort. While I know millions of Ohioans – hopefully, a good number of you and a majority of voters by November 7 – support Issue #1, but I am the only Faith leader in Ohio on the ads. That is particularly hard at some hours of the day and night.

Second, it is clear the God I worship is different than the God they worship. I believe God stands with pregnant women and their loved ones when they struggle over critical decisions throughout all stages of pregnancy. This is not for the government to decide. It is for the people who are intimately,



purposefully, spiritually, prayerfully, and thoughtfully struggling with decisions for each to decide – case by case.

Third, I find comfort, solace and depth of thought and reflection in the 5784 years of Jewish tradition and faith. In Jewish tradition two truths have survived thousands of years: First, the pregnant person's life takes precedence over the fetus. Second, every case is dealt with on its own merit, on a case-by-case basis. Jewish law cares about the diversity of experience, and just as every person was created in the divine image, so is every pregnancy regarded as totally unique.

The halachic – Jewish legal – term which values the mother's life above the fetus is called *tza'ar gufah kadim* – literally, the suffering (*tza'ar*) of the pregnant person's body (*gufah*) comes first (*kadim*). It is exactly this Halachic writing which Issue #1 calls for and acknowledges. By passing Issue #1 we acknowledge in our Constitution that the suffering of the pregnant comes first.

Rabbi David M. Feldman explains it this way: “The fetus is unknown, future, potential, part of the ‘secrets of God;’ the mother is known, present, alive and asking for compassion.” Therefore, while the fetus' condition is highly regarded, the pregnant person's needs are central to any abortion related decision according to Jewish law. Every single case is decided individually.

Although outnumbered 46 negative outside emails to 1 positive outside email, I lift up the singular voice coming from a woman in rural Ohio (whose name I am protecting). Her voice inspires me to keep fighting for reproductive rights.

She wrote to me: *“Thank you for standing up and speaking out for reproductive rights, not only for women but all touched by these decisions. It is true authentic love for one another when we can see past our passions to a place of empathy and kindness. I feel so many people do not understand the need for this law. I was 11 when I was raped. I didn't get pregnant. If I had it would have been devastating.*

*Myself and so many females in Appalachia were sexually abused by family, friends, men of power.*

*We were able to secretly get the birth control pill, some got abortions. Unfortunately, this abuse still goes on. To force these women and girls to carry a child to birth is cruel. It is also an enormous financial burden in an already poverty-stricken area. I have family members that did have the babies. They were unwanted babies and became victims of abuse too. Many – so many – became abusers.*

*I am so grateful you spoke up. I feel relieved that someone finally said, this must end. Showing people that any act of kindness is an act of love and will change the world to peace. Bless you.” And bless you – my friend!*

God prioritizes two key values in Exodus 20: honor God and love your neighbor. Do not dishonor God’s image in your neighbor. If human-made laws are racist, misogynistic, or otherwise unjust, such that they cannot be followed while honoring God’s image in every human being, then they contradict God’s laws and have no claim over a person of faith. In that sense, God’s laws offer a kind of freedom: earthly laws that contradict our higher law do not contain us. We can resist when we need to. We can struggle together for a better world.

In so doing, we find ourselves building new tools. In an exploitative world, we build generosity. In a competitive world, we build communal mindedness. In a rushed and impatient world, we build space to rest. In a world where wealth is unjustly distributed, those who have resources refuse to try to gain more and more; instead, they open their hands to share with those who do not have enough. In doing these things, we – like the Israelites learning how to live out their brand-new liberation – become truly free (Ibid).

Today, we face Constitutional questions and decisions as a community of faith. In these changes, how are we building something different? And how will we practice “Constitutional Grace” as we seek to live generously



in community? Finally, how will we follow and incorporate God's ten laws which are truly guidelines for human flourishing? Amen.