

“The Priesthood of All Believers”

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

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

October 29, 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

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“The Priesthood of All Believers”

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

A meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, October 29, 2023, dedicated to the memory of Lola Davis Edwards who entered eternal life on October 24, 2023, to all the Stephen Ministers and Stephen Ministry leaders of First Church and to all the reformers in our tradition who have fought for what is right through centuries of witness and struggle and always to the glory of God!

Today is Reformation Sunday 2023. 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 simply as Protestants. Almost 506 years have passed since that day. Today I would like to lift up one of Luther's central beliefs coming out of the Reformation – The Priesthood of All Believers.

This comes from I Peter 2:9, *“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*

+++++

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.

+++++

We begin today on a mountaintop 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 the Promised Land. And we discover Moses will not get there with them.

God takes Moses to Mt. Nebo's peak. From there Moses sees all the future territory of the Promised Land. 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 God's Chosen people, Israel. And the serenity with which Moses accepts his own mortality reveals the peace that pervades his heart. He is ready to let go. He is ready to die.

Having seen it all, Moses dies there. He is buried in the Valley of Moab in a place no one knows, so that no shrine may 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 – the first great Reformer!

Moses is not the only reformer in our Reformation Day texts. He is joined by **Joshua Rabbeinu**, Jesus the Rabbi. Jesus 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 – declared in every synagogue in every single service of worship – *“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.”*

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 do not return with any more antagonizing questions and pontificating answers.

Did someone ask – *“Is there a Messiah in the house!?”*

Throughout his ministry, Jesus answers all his critics nose to nose, face to face. He never backs down. He never turns away. HE never runs and hides. 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 reformation – reforming the laws and understanding of 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 always about reforming of reformed laws. Without a doubt, he is the first Reformer of our Christian Faith and calls us to be reformers, too.

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? And how is the church responding 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. We have a saying in the United Church of Christ, “we are reformed and reforming.” We come from the reformed tradition, but we are constantly in the work of reforming the church and our society.

On this day, as we lift up the reformers of our faith – Moses and Jesus – let’s finish by lifting up the greatest Protestant reformer of the early 16th Century– Father Martin Luther. In 1520 – just three years after his October 31,1517 declaration of independence – Martin Luther wrote one of his most important treatises. It was called, *“The Freedom of a Christian.”* This week, I was reading it again. It is saved for all of us in volume #2 of the six-volume set- The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ. In this beautiful, biblical treatise, Luther lays out his understanding of following Jesus and spends a lot of time talking about “The Priesthood of all believers.”

I know Martin Luther would have loved The Stephen Ministry. Not only was it started by Rev. Dr. Kenneth Haugk in 1975, but its essence is caring for others based on love. Stephen Ministry is the embodiment of the Priesthood of all believers. It is a Reformation Ministry! Thank you, Ken!

Luther writes that it is each of our calling to be servants of God – pointing out “Holy Scripture makes no distinction between (laypeople and ecclesiastics – clergy). Although it gives the name “ministers,” or “servants,” “stewards,” to those who lead, they cannot be holy set apart.” He continues, “although we are all equally priests, we cannot all publicly minister and teach.” The

problem sets in when those who have been called to be the “priests” or “ministers” lord it over the others. The key is that we are all called to be servants of God and one another. All of us are called to be faithful to Christ. As such, we are called to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves – this, says Luther, is the true sign of a Christian. A truly Christian life is one where faith is active through love – this life finds expression in works of the freest service cheerfully and lovingly done; in which a person willingly serves another without hope of reward; and it satisfied the fullness that comes from serving others and wealth of faith” (pp. 114-115, see cited above).

Near the end of “The Freedom of a Christian,” Luther writes, “we conclude therefore, that a Christians lives not in himself (or herself), but in Christ and in his (or her) neighbor. Otherwise, this person is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, and in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself in God. By love he moves out of himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in God’s love” (*Ibid*, p.117).

Today, we commission nine new Stephen Ministers at First Church – resurrecting a ministry which once was alive and vibrant. Scripture tells us that unless a seed falls into the ground and dies, it cannot rise up. We witness the rising of the seed. Thanks be to God and Gary Glover – for caring for this seed into new birth before us all this Reformation Sunday!

Their ministry rising is a sign for all of us. We are all God’s embodiment of the priesthood of all believers. Each of us is a servant of God. Each of us is a steward for the Lord. Each of us is called to follow Christ faithfully and joyfully and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Today, I invite each of you to find your place in the Reformation of faith and life at First Church. We are all ministers here. May God Bless you as you find or create your ministry and step into it – today. Amen.

