

Pressing On

Ordinary Time

October 4-25, 2020

Week 1: Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (World Communion Sunday)
– That I May Gain Christ
October 4, 2020 – Philippians 3:4b-14

Week 2: Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Think On These Things
October 11, 2020 – Philippians 4:1-9



Week 3: Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (**Laity Sunday**) – Known by Name
October 18, 2020 – Exodus 33:12-23

Week 4: Reformation Sunday – On These Two Commandments
October 25, 2020 – Matthew 22:34-46



Pressing On seems our normal mode these days. We are overwhelmed with changes, overrun with failures, overruled by objections. It seems as though every step is an uphill climb. Yet, we press on. There are tasks to perform and goals to reach, there are people to lead and a Kin-dom to build. Is this how we understand pressing on, however, checking off our list of accomplishments? Certainly a task oriented approach can be fruitful in our ministry. What we do as individuals and as a church community is important. It could also be exhausting for each and for all. Which is why pressing on is multi-dimensional. Yes, there are tasks to performed, yes there is doing involved; but the doing grows out of the being of the body of Christ. We can pay attention to who we are, even as we engage in what we do. This October, you are invited to be Pressing On.

Week 1: Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (World Communion Sunday)

– That I May Gain Christ

October 4, 2020 – **Philippians 3:4b-14**

INTRODUCTION

This is World Communion Sunday, a service which could certainly stand on its own. It carries enough weight and meaning to not need the support of a larger theme. Many worshiping communities have traditions and practices that accompany World Communion Sunday and ought to remain in place. Let this service be significant in the mind and hearts of the congregation.

As you can see in these 2017 World Communion planning notes, a previous iteration of the worship team believed that World Communion ought to stand alone. And argued that it would be impossible to give the event its due without doing so: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/world-communion-sunday-2017-planning-notes>

The current team takes a different view. We decided to fold this observance into the larger theme of “Pressing On.” Our intent in that is to express the belief that the world with which we desire to be in communion is broken and that part of our on-going hope as followers of Jesus is that we proclaim the Kin-dom of God until

he comes. We announce the world wide communion until it becomes a reality. We're pressing on toward what God has in store.

So, how do we celebrate the world as it is at the same time as we long for the world as it will be? Through connections. The worship team might invite members of the worshipping congregation to share something about their connections, their roots. We are a nation of immigrants, but for many it may be way back. So, trace those roots. Find out something about the countries of origin and then bring a representation of that origin into the worship space. Maybe a world map with pins in it, maybe images from each nation represented in the make-up of the community, something to expand the world around us.

Some have said that World Communion was a time when every Christian all over the world shared in that celebration of sacrament. Well, the truth is, a lot of the world doesn't have an event called World Communion Sunday. So, what we are acknowledging on that day is that the body of Christ is bigger than what we can see, bigger than what is contained within our walls. Many congregations discovered this when they went to an online only format. Reports are that attendance at online worship experiences outstripped the in person worship numbers in quite a few congregations. And some of these were in other parts of the world. This might be something to celebrate on this World Communion Sunday. Have you identified worshipers who are with you virtually from places other than your local community? If so, how might you introduce them to the local congregation?

Along with this view of the world through connections already present, attention should be paid to the connections that are needing to be made. What populations surround the physical building of the church, and the real church the scattered people who gather in person and online? How has your community changed in terms of demographic diversity that is not yet reflected in the constituency of the church? What might we learn of the immigrants around us, the citizens who come from other places? How might we create a welcoming space for those who are near us and yet different from us?

Let us celebrate the diversity that is and the diversity that could be. Let's embrace the fullness of the world that surrounds us. Oh, and that bread thing mentioned in the article from 2017, the one where it has been a practice to gather all lot of

different loaves of bread from around the world to represent diversity. It can be a great visual image, but we agree, it does waste a lot of bread. So, unless you have a plan for sharing it, and in this era of social distancing and disinfecting that probably isn't a good idea either. Why not make a slide show of different kinds of bread? Or along with the idea above about finding the roots of various members of the congregation, tie it into a picture of a typical bread from that country.

Behind all the celebration of diversity is an admission that we are not as diverse as we need to be, as the Kin-dom of God will be. So, you could include a confession of homogeneity even as you long for diversity. We are pressing on to a truer reflection of the Kin-dom in our everyday life.

PREACHING NOTES

Press on. That's the phrase that is driving us this week, and this whole series. Press on. The text begins with Paul's idiosyncratic claim of self-promotion. "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more!" Yes, of course, he tosses this away in a few verses, but doesn't it sound like he's boasting about not boasting sometimes? Well, yes, it does sound like that, but listen closer and you'll hear what is actually an act of great humility.

His list here in our text for today, used to give him such joy, such a feeling of success, or power, or prestige. That's what he's saying here. The things that this world measures to let us know how we're doing and where we stand in relation to everyone else, he had them. Still has them, actually and isn't above using them when it helps his cause, like his Roman citizenship that helps him in a tight spot. But, he argues, these things no longer mean anything to him. He counts them as loss. What the world see as gain, he sees as loss. These things, these values, these privileges get in the way of where he wants to be going now. In the way of who he wants to be now.

He even gets coarser in his rejection of his former glory. "*Skubalon*" is the word he chooses, after using "loss" twice. "*Skubalon*" has stirred up some interesting debates over the centuries. Some argue, and most translations prefer, something tamer, like rubbish or garbage or refuse. Others argue that the word is better translated as excrement, or dung. Still some want to suggest that this is a slang

term, “locker room talk” perhaps and has been used as a swear word. What does it matter, however, and other than for the titillation factor why would the preacher want to bring up all this tedious word study? Well, we certainly aren’t advocating for swearing during the sermon. But paying attention to the turnaround in Paul’s life is important for grasping this message.

Too often we present the gospel as if it will only clean things up a little bit. Faith is just a way to be nicer or happier, it just works on the edges of our lives, the part we have room to add a little Jesus into. But Paul presents the life of faith as one of radical reorientation. Everything in the old life is not worth the time of day. Everything that this world considers important is now just ... well, rubbish.

Now, here’s the tricky thing in this text, it sounds like an either/or, like a one day that and the next day this. But it isn’t that neat. It isn’t that quick. That’s where pressing on comes from. That’s where “that I might gain Christ” figures in. Paul admits that he’s not there yet. There is too much of the old life that is hanging on. He still sees too much value in the rubbish.

That’s why he chooses most of the time to talk more about what is gained than what is lost. You’re thinking, that doesn’t seem right, he’s always talking about the life of the flesh and how destructive it is. And that’s true. But looking back, his real purpose is to talk about the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ. That’s what he’s heading toward, he wants to look beyond the rubbish, he wants to turn away from the excrement of his former life because he’s found something better.

Our proclamation is about that something better. We spend far too much time talking about what is wrong with the world, what we should avoid, what is broken. And there are times that we, like Paul, need to point out the rubbish so that we can begin to look beyond it. But if you analyze your sermons over the past year, or even the past few months, would you say the weight is on the rubbish or the surpassing value of knowing Christ? Often we preachers are too good at diagnosis and too weak at resolution. We see the problem, but we don’t imagine the cure, we don’t cast the vision of the new life in as compelling a way.

Consider reading on for two more verses. It gives you a second two-word phrase that might help with resolution. If “press on” is the motivator, then “hold fast” is the descriptor. We are encouraged to press on, to move toward a more just society, to claim a better vision of the beloved community, to make disciples of

Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. But we hold fast to that which will keep us on track, that which will define us. We need to hold fast in order to press on. If we don't hold fast, to our faith, our relationship with Jesus Christ when we press on we will quickly lose our way. If we surrender our hope, our passion for our church and our Lord, then we will have no reason to press on and the business of the church becomes meaningless. But by holding fast to Christ, then pressing on becomes the joy that it can be.

That's one way to approach World Communion, by holding fast while we press on. The truth is, and no one will deny it, we are not the world we long to be. We don't live in harmony with our neighbors, the nations don't aspire to the mountain of the house of the Lord in order to beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. And we who are called to be tending the house of the Lord aren't necessarily doing in a way that it might draw all the nations or even the stranger in our own neighborhoods to us. So, we're called to press on. While we hold fast to the image of the Kin-dom of God that Jesus presents to us, we press on until it is established in our midst. Not that it is up to us to establish it, but still we work as though it is. We labor in the fields to which Christ has sent us, pressing on to the surpassing value of knowing Christ more. We're not there yet, either, Paul, but we hold the vision and press on to the goal.

Week 2: Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Think On These Things
October 11, 2020 – **Philippians 4:1-9**

INTRODUCTION

Does it seem that there are simply too many things to think about these days? It's overwhelming, to say the least. And many in your worshiping congregation may seem overwhelmed. Which is why it just might be time for a reset. The Rev. Junius Dotson, General Secretary of Discipleship Ministries, has written **Soul Reset**, a book about finding space to breathe, about reorienting one's life with gospel priorities. It might be a good resource for planning the service this week, which is a week of getting our thinking straight.

Paul writes in the 4th chapter of Philippians about reorienting the mind.

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (*Phil. 4:8*).

Worship can be an opportunity to consider again what it is that is worth occupying our minds. Our world is full of all kinds of demands on our mental space, much of which is not really for our benefit or a way to enhance our faith or our discipleship.

This a perfect time to take your time as you worship. Spend some time on the words of the songs that you use in worship. Let the meanings sink in a little bit, listen to the images of God and of the church that are presented in the music. Take the prayers apart and look at the components, consider what it is that you are actually praying for as we recite the Lord's Prayer, for example. What are all these petitions? Why are the requests put in this order, what is the true hope of the prayer, how radical is this thing that we've said so many times before that we aren't really listening anymore? Think on these things.

This is a week to send folks away from the worship experience, whether in person or online, with an assignment. Give something to read, something to consider, something to pray about. Challenge worshipers to use their brains this week. The church is needed for that transformation of the world thing we've been talking

about. We need to be pressing on toward something new and true and honorable and just and ... Well, you get the picture.

Don't make it too easy, or too disconnected from life. Raise some current, pertinent issues and invite folks to fill their minds with the honorable response, not the knee-jerk or polarized one. Of course, it will be important to follow up with monitored conversations in order to bring the wisdom of the community in the light of the gospel to bear. This is one (of many) occasion where worship shouldn't end with the benediction, but should continue into the parking lot or chat rooms, into the zoom Sunday school and the virtual youth group meeting.

Remember, we're pressing on, on toward the Kin-dom of God. (In case you aren't familiar with the term "kin-dom" here is a definition we used in a forthcoming work from Discipleship Ministries titled: **Forming Disciples in Worship:**

The term *kin-dom* is used here to replace the pervasive male-oriented, imperialistic word "kingdom", especially in the liturgical context. Some theologians feel that "kin-dom" more fittingly reflects the kind of world Christ envisions. It refers to the family or relational aspect of God's recreation of the world, even as it recognizes the authority of the God we know in Jesus. Obviously, the roots of masculine language in scripture is derived from the political atmosphere of ancient empires. Both Feminist and Womanist studies have been intentional about the use of expansive language in liturgy.)

Whatever word or metaphor you use to describe the vision of God for all of creation, the undeniable fact is that were aren't there yet. But we're pressing on. Not that the establishment of the kin-dom is within our power, yet, we are called to act as if it was. We are called to build the kin-dom, starting with our own community, our own lives as we press on to where God has called us. This week we acknowledge that this pressing on won't happen without changing our minds, without thinking on these things!

PREACHING NOTES

Most biblical scholars say that this passage is a conglomeration of a number of different sayings. Maybe, they argue, it was all written down at one time, but

most likely this passage bears the hand of a at least one and maybe many different editors, adding in bits and pieces to fill out the list of exhortations. Or maybe it was all Paul just running down his checklist without regard to content or narrative flow. This is like a shopping list, or a menu from a Chinese restaurant, one from column A and one from column B.

Maybe there is a coherence here, however. What if what Paul is trying to do is to define joy in these verses. This is a recipe for the joy entree. Which might explain why it feels disjointed, but in fact all comes together to produce something whole, and satisfying and delicious to boot!

Joy, says Paul, is revealed in gentleness, in how we treat those around us, in how we respond to slights against us and how we reach out to those who are hurt. *“Let your gentleness be known to everyone”* says Paul. Let it show. Joy is found in the knowledge and experience of the nearness of God, *(The Lord is near)* a nearness that diminishes anxiety and brings out a willingness to connect with God with gratitude and with hope *(in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God)*. Joy is found in that communion, that peaceful confidence that comes from living in Christ.

But then, it gets sticky. Paul’s has to throw a messy word in there. “Always.” Dang it Paul. Why did you have throw that word in there? That unreachable, impossible word? That *always* word. Take that word out and this is a nice little passage about being happy, about finding your joy, about walking on the sunny side of life. It’s got a nice beat and you can dance to it. A spoonful of sugar, all that sort of stuff. But, no you weren’t happy with that. You wanted something more, something deeper. You wanted something, (dare we say it?), eternal.

Cover one eye and read this without that scary word. Just for a moment. “Rejoice in the Lord.” Well, of course! Who would say no to that. Again I say rejoice. Sure, keep reminding us, we need the boost. We also need reminded of the source of this joy - rejoice in the Lord. Certainly, we can do that. We have done that. We can remember a time when there was joy in the Lord, in worship, in fellowship. Sure, it happens. Been there, done that.

And then, Paul says, let it spill out. That joy in the Lord is not just for you. Not just so that you get a boost, a lift, a skip in your step. Let it come out. “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” Gentleness? Hmm. Not sure that’s the best

word, actually. A good word, but not the best. Doesn't quite convey what Paul is getting at here. Patience, some say, forbearance if anyone uses that word anymore, magnanimity if you want a real tongue twister. Peterson's **The Message** says, "Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them." That's good. An earlier paraphrase said "Let all the world know that you'll meet them half-way." It's about hospitality, about welcome, about inclusion, about the fact that we are the judge, we don't point fingers, we don't accuse, we dropped our stones long ago, even since Jesus told us that only the sinless can throw them. We aren't looking to pick fights, to call names. What we have to share is joy. Joy in the Lord. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Everyone? Paul almost slipped in an always there, didn't he? Everyone. Hmmm.

Don't worry about anything. Yeah, ok, thanks Paul. But no thanks. How in the world are we going to do that? It's one thing to know we aren't supposed to worry, but how do we stop? And then because we can't stop we end up worrying about worrying.

I guess that's why there is a comma there and not a period. "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Don't worry, says Paul, but get on your knees. Don't worry, but pour it out. Don't worry but beg and plead and pound on the doorways of heaven with both fists, even as you know - not hope, not assume, but *know* - that you are heard and that answers are already all around you when you open your eyes again and put one foot in front of the other. Don't worry because you don't have time to worry, you are so busy bending God's divine ear. Don't worry because your life is now a prayer and the answers are coming fast and furious and surprising.

Don't worry because from somewhere comes this sense that maybe, just maybe you are not alone in the universe. This sense that maybe you do have a place, a home, an identity, an existence right here and right now that is meaningful, useful, transformed and transforming. From somewhere, who knows where, God, it must be, comes a peace that even on your best days you can't define or even describe. It just is, passing all understanding, or your understanding anyway.

For now, though, choose joy. Rejoice in the Lord. Always. We've come back to that. It is still there. We can only squint it away for so long. We can only ignore it for a time. Rejoice in the Lord, Always. Maybe we could negotiate with Paul. Rejoice in the Lord, when it is convenient. Rejoice in the Lord when we've got the time. When we're in the mood, when the world hasn't taken yet another sideswipe at my confidence. Rejoice in the Lord when I've run out of excuses not to. Rejoice in the Lord ... Always. Always?

How in the world do we do that? Focus on the next one? No, focus more deeply on this one. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Think on, dwell on, meditate on, take your cue from, be obsessed with these things. Look at the list: True, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, praise-worthy. What is that? Who is that? Implied in the directive is the confidence that there is enough of this out there in the world to fill us up. And not only fill us up but give us joy. Real joy, In the Lord joy. Always joy. Paul says go find Christ in the world. Go find the one you love, the one who loves you, focus on that and you will know joy. Think about these things, he writes, live in these things, fill yourself up with these things.

Then, he says, live in community, that's where we find joy. It is a corporate experience, not an individual one. Find a mentor, someone who can show you the faith at work, someone who walks the walk. (*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me*) Engage in acts of kindness, give, serve, love. Also, be content where you are, bloom where you are planted instead of always wishing things were different. And finally, take risks. Step out in faith, knowing that as long as you walk with God you cannot fail. (Read on a few verses: *I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*)

Joy, then is a dynamic, the result of an ongoing relationship and way of living that keeps us engaged with God and with people. And it leaks out as we engage with others, it shapes our language and our vision. In short, it shows. In everything we do, in who we are, in the attitudes we present, the face we offer to the world, it shows.

Think on these things as you are pressing on. Think of these joy things, these always things. Think in gentleness and confidence and prayer. Think on these things. It's the only way to be strong enough to press on.

Week 3: Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (**Laity Sunday**) – Known by Name
October 18, 2020 – **Exodus 33:12-23**

INTRODUCTION

Laity Sunday is embraced with enthusiasm in some congregations and ignored by others. If your congregation has an established pattern then, of course, we encourage you to continue it. And if you aren't used to letting laity take the chancel, then we hope you'd at least consider it this year. Laity Sunday can take all kinds of forms, with all levels of involvement in the leading of worship. If there is no one prepared or ready to give a sermon or message, then perhaps there could be testimonies, on video or live, that would add a lay voice to the proceedings. There could be a dialog sermon, perhaps, or other way of allowing the lay voice to be heard from the front of the sanctuary or on the screen.

We also encourage the worship team to plan to keep the theme going even on Laity Sunday. Let the laity voice be a continuation of the worship plan and not an aberration, or a diversion. There are notes here to help with the planning of the sermon as well as the service as a whole. Let the pastor and the lay speaker work together on the message, regardless of who will actually deliver it.

The purpose of worship is always to give glory to God, to direct the thoughts and hearts of the worshiping congregation God-ward. In short, worship is always about God before anything else. That said, it is also the time when the community gathers to recapture a shared vision of who they are as the community in that place at this time. And whether that place is virtual, communicated through screens or face to face, it is also about making disciples of Jesus Christ. There is no need for this thrust to be set aside because a lay person is bringing the message of the day.

The word for today is Presence: God's abiding and constant presence. But not a random, "force-like" presence that just is. This is an intimate presence, a personal presence, a presence that knows your name. What a proclamation to bring this week. You are known. In our over mediated society, it is often the individual that gets lost in the mass of voices and noise that surrounds us. There are many in

your congregation who can attest to the feeling of being lonely in a crowd. This week could be an antidote to those feelings.

This is why testimony is such an effective tool for knowing and being known. Many worshipers have observed that once a testimony is shared, then that person is seen through new and informed eyes. We are not just faces in the crowd, we are the one who ... met God face to face, survived an illness, turned their life around, the one who found hope in a hopeless situation, the one who found love renewed, and on and on. Tell your story and listen to the stories of others.

Perhaps, if you're meeting in place, you could invite attendees to bring something that represents their journey and set up a worship center, keeping in mind all of the physical distancing requirements. Or have participants email a photo that says something about who they are and how God has impacted their lives. You could do this with explanations or simply let people speculate as they watch the slide show. It could generate some healthy conversations.

Let the worship be a celebration of the laity, of the people in the pews or behind the screens, scattered or gathered. Let the leadership give thanks for the people. Here might be a chance to do some statistical check in (maybe it's charge conference time?) But not as a way of bemoaning who's not there, not as a complaint because we're so small. Jesus worked well with 12. Let it be a thanksgiving for who is here, who is a part of us.

Let there also be an open door, an anticipation for those who will be a part of us in new ways perhaps, a reminder that we are always seeking to issue an invitation. Not simply to grow the church, but to make disciples, to spread the gospel. We work for the kin-dom of God. And we press on.

PREACHING NOTES

Perhaps a bit of a jolt to jump from Paul's Letter to the Philippians all the way back to Exodus, but the pressing on theme resonates loudly in this wilderness wandering story. If you are observing Laity Sunday this week, then Exodus is a perfect text to explore a few important and lay intensive themes. So, it seemed a good jump to make, forgive the textual whiplash!

Let's start with the obvious. In Exodus we have a leader on the edge. This is not to say that your church is dealing with a leader who is questioning her or his call. But it happens, maybe more than we realize, certainly more than we will admit. Even to ourselves, let alone to the larger community. But leadership is difficult. Trying to press on while keeping everyone content enough to go along is a near impossible task. Even the leaders who are wise enough to realize that their job is not to keep everyone happy, still wrestle with dissention. No matter how well trained we might be, there is, with Moses, a creeping suspicion that we weren't given enough information to do this monumental pilgrimage; that we weren't given enough help – wisdom, insight, grace, whatever – to be the leader that is needed.

Yet. Such an important word. For some reason the NIV skips it. But most translations give us this word asking for a pause. A hesitation, a rethink, perhaps; “yet” is a word of reversal. On one side of the yet is hesitation, uncertainty, “I don't know who is on my side” or “I don't know who will support me.” But then the yet brings another truth, a deeper truth. “You – my God, my hope – have said you know me by name.”

It would be a poor leader who said that he or she didn't care whether anyone else was willing to follow, to stand alongside. But a church leader knows that what comes first is a call from God. “The hand of the Lord is upon me,” that's how Jesus began his ministry. And each of us who want to lead God's people need to have that sense of affirmation from God in order to do the task set before us.

Presence, that is what we seek. God's presence in particular. To know and be known, it can get us through a lot, through the difficult days ahead, through the complicated questions and the bone crushing rejection and the weighty issues that overwhelm us on a regular basis. To walk in the confidence that we are known by God, that God walks with us as we go is the first step on our journey.

One of our first realizations is that we are always in the presence of God. It is the nature of God to be present.

“We cannot attain the presence of God because we're already in the presence of God. What's absent is awareness. Little do we realize that God's love is maintaining us in existence with every breath we take. As we take

another, it means that God is choosing us now and now and now and now." [-Richard Rohr, https://cac.org/loving-the-presence-in-the-present-2015-12-29/](https://cac.org/loving-the-presence-in-the-present-2015-12-29/)

Awareness of this presence grows from relationship. That's what is behind this text. Back up a verse and read this:

"Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent." (*Exod. 33:11*)

Moses, and Joshua his protégé, knew that in order to become aware of the presence of God, you have to spend time with God. See, the text says that God and Moses spent a lot of time in conversation, like friends. Like friends, meaning they enjoyed one another's company, but argued as much as agreed. It was a contentious relationship from the beginning. No denying that. They complained to each other, dreamed together, they debated the meaning of life. All the usual stuff that friends do.

This time, Moses is saying he's gotten the short end of the stick again. You gave me this job, he says, but you don't say how I'm supposed to do it, or who is going to help me do it, or even for sure what it is we are supposed to do now. I've got no road map, I've got no itinerary, I've got no clue what's next. All I've got is this vague sense of call and the fact that you seem to like me for some reason. And besides this is your mess to fix and not mine anyway. God says, I'm here, take it easy. Moses says, well, duh. You're here. You'd better be here since this is all your idea anyway. But I need more than that. Way more. God says, OK. Because I like you. Because I told you my name. OK. Moses is a bit stunned by this turn in the conversation and he whispers "Show me your glory."

So, what did he ask? For a light show? For thunder and lightning? Or something else? Glory. How do we give God glory? Or how do we acknowledge God's glory? By how we live. Yeah, sometimes it is praise and worship, but mostly we glorify God by living as God would have us live. Moses wanted something tangible. He wanted to see God walking around, living the way Moses was supposed to live. In short, thousands of years before time, he was asking for Jesus. He wanted God to put on flesh and come and hang out with him. Come and guide him. Come and sustain him. For the task he was feeling way too inadequate to do. To lead the people, he was sure didn't want to be led by the likes of him. He wanted a

glimpse of how it was supposed to be, how he was supposed to be in God. He wanted Jesus.

In the morning, when I rise, give me Jesus. We are asking for glory when we sing that song, when we pray that prayer. Give me Jesus. Give me a glimpse of how I'm supposed to walk. Give me a hint of how I'm to do this task you've given me to do when I know it is beyond my ability to do. Parenting, pastoring, teaching, leading, living in love with neighbor and family, none of it is within my capabilities to do. None of it.

God says, I know. So, here's what I'll do. I'll make all my goodness pass before you. Wait, what? My goodness, God says, just what you need. Just what will equip you, just what will fill you. On your own the tasks before you are beyond you. But filled with my goodness, then the impossible becomes possible. Filled with my goodness, God says to Moses, you can lead these people. Goodness is not some ethical standard, some state of being, it is the empowering force that equips us to live as God's people. It is blessing. God blessed Moses on that mountaintop, just as God blesses us anytime we let the Spirit fill us. Filled with my goodness, God says to us, you can be who I created you to be. Filled with my goodness... See, we are so used to thinking these are attributes that we generate ourselves. That if we work hard enough then we will become good. But that isn't how it works. It is a gift. It is the Spirit. At work within us. And we let it, because we know that without it, we fall short of who we want to be, let alone who God can equip us to be. And we invite the Spirit to bring us God's goodness because we want it, we want to be there. We want to be that. That something more, that something new. We want to love like that.

In the goodness of God, the God who knows us by name, we can press on. Press on as a community of faith. Press on as the body of Christ who seeks to transform the world by making disciples of Jesus Christ. We press on.

If you're observing Laity Sunday, then this can be a time of dedication to the cause, the vision of the church. This could be a time of an expression of support for the one sent to lead, a way of saying we're on board and we will follow you as you follow Christ. We will commit to pressing on as one body of faith in this place, in this unusual time. Whether we are face to social distant face or still virtual, we are one community, pressing on.

Week 4: Reformation Sunday – On These Two Commandments

October 25, 2020 – **Matthew 22:34-46**

INTRODUCTION

Reformation Sunday is an interesting event. In one sense it has become an opportunity for all non-Catholic churches to celebrate their history and the break that Luther and then others led in a break from the Roman influence in Europe. Some historians claim that it was on October 31 that Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the Wittenberg church door. So, this is the Sunday closest to that event.

It is important to note that the United Methodist Church is not a part of the Reform Church. Our origin is different, coming from the Church of England which broke from the Roman Catholic Church for completely different reasons, having to do with a king who didn't like pesky rules of marriage that the popes laid down. Which means that technically, the United Methodist Church isn't a Protestant Church. We are part of what is more properly called the Anglo-Catholic Tradition.

Now, is all that worth trying to explain to the congregation during worship this week? Probably not. Sending folks from worship with the word that they aren't really protestants might cause undue stress. However, as we are in full communion with the Lutheran Church (ELCA), we can join with them in celebration of this day and look to Luther for the trailblazing he took on and from which Wesley learned.

We can acknowledge the theology behind reform, however, and be reminded that what Luther was trying to do was to bring the Church back to the basics of the faith, back to the bible, back to Jesus. Every now and then, we all need to be reminded to keep the main thing the main thing in our worship. And what better way than to return to Jesus's reminder of the core of our gospel. When asked what were the greatest commandments, his reply was simple: Love God and love neighbor.

That's where we start this week, that foundational statement of who we are and how we're supposed to be living. The loving God part of the equation is expressed in our worship. Sing songs of praise, of the attributes of God, sing about the presence and power of the God we worship. Show images of beauty that draw

our hearts toward the creator; create artwork that echoes that same beauty. Fill the space, or the screen with signs of God at work around you. Something as simple as a sunset, a flower in the midst of concrete, can be a witness to the God we love with our whole being.

Don't neglect the second part, however. When Jesus says "a second is like it" he meant is essential to it, is a part of it. We cannot love God fully without loving neighbor. The two are inseparable in the end. So, how do we depict loving our neighbor? Bring the images of mission work within the congregation. That trip to Appalachia or out west, the labor provided to build or repair a home for a stranger in need. Or the food collection, the Christmas gifting, wherever the people have been at work in the community. Include last year's VBS, or outdoor Sunday School effort. What children have been impacted? Whose life has been changed because of the love of the congregation? Tell the story, show the photos, remind everyone that this is how we love, with our hands and with our generosity and hospitality.

Pray prayers to inspire us to love in action, confession for when we fall short, encouragement even in the face of rejection. Let our liturgy declare that we want to keep the main thing the main thing. A litany that would fit the second of the commandments would be The World Methodist Social Affirmation #886 UM Hymnal. This is a declaration of involvement in the world around us, our belief that God is experienced through living in the world, through caring and giving and healing.

Maybe it is time for your congregation to claim a reformation. To set aside the things that get in the way of being the church as Jesus describes it, the community who loves God and loves neighbor with commitment and passion. This is the way that we, as disciples and as a congregation, will press on.

PREACHING NOTES

To test Him. That's what Matthew says. And Luke agrees (10:25ff). Mark has a different take (12:28-34). Mark says that the scribe, or lawyer, was really interested. Was really asking. And when Jesus answered the lawyer claps his hands and says, "yeah, that's what I thought, that's what makes sense, cool,

thanks Jesus.” And Jesus is impressed by him, and says “you’ve got it. You’re on the right track, almost there.”

Almost there. Not far from the Kingdom, that’s what He says. What I wouldn’t give to hear that from Jesus. But whether it was a test or a genuine question, Jesus answers the same. What’s the greatest commandment? The number one law. The summation of the code. Which is not really the question He is answering. I mean it is the question He is answering. But not only that. Not just a legal question. Not just a doctrinal question. This is a life question. No, a living question. How can I be alive? That could have been, should have been the question that He was asked. How can I be alive? Fully alive? How can I be perfect?

Hold on there, sparky! You do not want to go there. You do not want to use the p-word. It goes against one of our treasured defining statements of life in general: Nobody is perfect! Yeah, we know Jesus told us to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect. But surely He didn’t really mean it. Or said it with His divine fingers crossed, or a holy eye roll. Surely. Yeah, we know that John Wesley wanted to talk about Christian Perfection as if it were something reachable. But he got a lot of flak for that. Then and now. And even he seemed to waver on his confidence about whether it was attainable later in his life and ministry. Perhaps he had been exposed to too many human humans and began to despair that Christian perfection was even in the same time zone, let alone in the neighborhood.

Yet he did not give up, old father John Wesley. He still preached Christian perfection, despite the overwhelming evidence of imperfection. That’s where we are now, in our series, the “way to heaven” path that we are on this Lent. We started with sin, the sin that cripples us, infects us, overwhelms us. Then we acknowledged grace, the grace that comes before. Before what? Before we’ve done anything, before we’ve responded, before we’ve asked, before we were even aware we needed grace, knew about grace, understood grace. It comes before all of that. Prevenient grace, that’s what it’s called.

But then we discover that we can respond to this grace that we’ve found, or that has found us. We can say yes, we can say please, we can say give me some of that grace, I know I need it, I know I’m far from it, I know I’m lost without it. I want to be right again, right with the One who made me, the One who loves me. Justifying

grace. That moment of claiming and being claimed. A new birth, a new creation, a new start.

It is a start, just the start. The beginning of a journey, a lifelong journey of hope and joy. Of living in to the possibilities of faith. Of being made more like Christ, being made more alive. Sanctifying grace, that which equips us for a life of loving like Christ loves. Of loving God with all our heart and soul and mind, and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Surely that's it. That's the journey, that's our life. What else could there be? Perfection. Seriously? Yeah. But wait, it's not what you think. Not the unattainable, not the infallible, mistake free image of perfection that we have in mind. Wesley defined Christian perfection, or perfection in love, in specific ways. He says that perfection in love doesn't mean perfection in knowledge. It doesn't mean we will always do the right thing at the right time. It doesn't mean that we will never have anything go wrong, that we won't be subject to the ills of life and living. We are subject to the same viruses, the same calamities, the errors that everyone else is subject to. We do not become super Christians or spiritual giants. Neither does it mean that we have no room to grow, no development to engage in. There is room for more. More perfection? Not exactly. More like you are perfect as you are now, but you can be more in the future and perfect then too.

Wha....? Perfection, Christian perfection, or perfection in love anyway, is not a state of being. Not a standard to achieve, not a behavior to perform. Instead it is a singularity of intent. It is the desire to will the will of God in all things. And I can will God's will now, knowing what I know, having lived the life I have lived to this point. But I can will God's will in the future, when I know more, have lived more, loved more. Steve Harper, the author of the book "**The Way to Heaven,**" describes a parent who measures a child in development and declares that they are perfect for a four-year-old. But not done, obviously. Not complete. There is always more to come, more to reach for more to give and more to be. Even as we claim perfect love.

Not that I'm there. Yet. Not that I have been made perfect in love. Yet. Not that I love the Lord with all my heart and soul and mind and my neighbor as myself. I want to. I really do. Sometimes. Now and then. On my better days. OK, the problem is my will. It gets in the way of God's will in my life. I'm like the lawyer in

the text this week. I'm asking, but not really asking. I want to know how to live my life in the best, most fulfilling way possible. But I'm not really making a commitment, yet. I'm testing the waters. Testing, you know?

The way to press on in this life of faith is to stand on these two guides, these two rules, these two descriptions of what a life of faith really is. Any other measure we might want to find is only valuable in that it reflects these two commandments. And even the word commandment gives the wrong impression sometimes. Can you command love? How about these two truths? These two fundamental truths about how to live life as God intended it to be, as we were created to be, are the foci around which everything we are and everything we desire circle.

We press on to embrace these truths, to make them descriptive of our entire lives. We can't just be testing the waters if we want to press on. We've got to dive in. We've got to take the baton. We've got ... how many other metaphors do we need? We press on in the strength of these two commandments.