

Exodus 20:1-17
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
“A Foolish Proclamation That Saves”

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If you're here for the first time today, I want to extend a very warm welcome to you. We have been together now for just about 30 minutes and already I hope you've decided it's been well worth your time and that you'll be coming back. You've come to a church that is in the tradition of the United Church of Christ. I don't know if you realize that. I don't know if it really matters to you. I would guess that for the great majority of us here today, that the sign on the front lawn reads, *Four Corners Community Chapel, United Church of Christ*, doesn't matter a whole lot. Maybe it did once upon a time, but what matters more to us now is that the money we needed to buy that sign was given by Bob Egerton. Bob's been sitting in the pews here for close to 50 years I would say. He gave the money and the sign as a gift by which we might remember his late wife, Carolyn. Now, when we see the sign, we don't tend to think about what it says, its letters and words. We think about Bob and Carolyn. We think about the people we have shared the pews with. And the people we'll talk to after service today when we go downstairs to get a cup of coffee, while our children happily gather in the corner around the piano with Vance, Nancy, and now I've noticed Jocelyn too. Vance, Nancy, and Jocelyn, who together must equal close to 225 years old, but who, if you haven't noticed, can bring out the sweetest sounds and smiles from a gang of 4, 7, and 10 year olds. Because we know and have to believe that the old saying is actually true: "The church isn't a building but a people."

Why just last weekend I was in my office after service with 17 of our children and their parents. As part of a workshop on communion, we were eating pizza together and talking about how important it is, whenever we sit down at the table to eat, to think not only about the people who are with us but also about the people who are not. "Like when my mom makes my grandma's meat stuffing recipe at Christmas and we remember my grandma," Allie said. Exactly. And I was careful to remind the children to remember the people who don't have tables, or who have tables but no food on their tables. Then I asked them to name some people who were not with us around the table.

"I'm remembering my friend Helen who isn't here today," said Vivian.

“And I’m remembering my friend Brendt,” said Sophia.

“And Shelby. She’s not here today,” added Charlotte.

Who are Helen, Brendt, and Shelby? You know exactly who they are. They’re the children of the church. Together, along with them, we are Four Corners Community Chapel, the United Church of Christ. Believe it or not, for all that makes us what we are, it’s this last part that perhaps says the most about us. That we are a church in the tradition of the United Church of Christ. This was actually the part of you that first drew me here. When I first learned about Four Corners Community Chapel—almost two years ago now—all I knew about you at that time was that you were part of the United Church of Christ. And that was enough for me. Because what I know of the United Church of Christ is that the people who wear its label are people who are committed to one another. It says something that we don’t keep to a code or to a common creed around here. Yes, there are things that we say we believe. On any given week, when it comes time in the service for the Responsive Reading, it will often begin with the words, “We believe.” “We believe that God is present in the darkness...We believe in a faith that takes us beyond the safe places...We believe that now is always the time to do good...We believe in God who is three-in-one, who has come to show us that it is better to live with and for others...

We believe these things without making them a prerequisite for belonging. Which is to say, if you don’t believe these things, it doesn’t make you any less a part of us or of this church, for what is faith without doubt and what are we without you?

In the United Church of Christ, we do not keep a creed. Nor do we maintain a hierarchy. There are no bishops, no presidents, no pope. We do not distinguish among ourselves by status. It is not more important for me to be here than it is for you to be here. All I am for the moment is the preacher, but what is a preacher without a listener? In the United Church of Christ, we do not wait for someone else to come along to tell us what to do about the poor, about our building and how best to use it as a place of refuge and hospitality, about our money and how to share it. For we already know. Our mantra is, “*God is still speaking,*” and don’t we know what God has said?

“Why do you spend your money on that which will not last? And, when you throw a party, why do you invite only your friends who are going to show up with gifts?”

Rather, when you throw a party, go into the streets and invite those who have no invitation and no party gift. Have I not chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom?"

In the United Church of Christ, we are free to agree and disagree all day long, to come and go as we please. No one is going to force unity upon us. And yet, for all that we don't have in the United Church of Christ to force us together, we do have a word for what holds us together. The word is, covenant. Biblically speaking, a covenant is a binding agreement between two parties, but one in which only one of the parties gets to establish the terms and demands of the agreement. It doesn't sound very fair, does it? Me telling you, this is how it's going to be. Not only do you not get any say in how it's going to be, but you can't say no to it.

In the last three weeks we have heard two covenant stories. From three weeks ago, the covenant between God and Noah in which God gives Noah a rainbow after the flood. "Never again will I destroy the earth with water. This is how it's going to be. This is my covenant with you Noah. I don't care how much you might make me want to do it, or how much you might want me to do it, I will not flood the world again." And from last week, the covenant between God and Abram. "Though you are beyond the age of possibility, I am going to give you and your wife, Sarai, a son, and you will be the father of many nations. This is how it's going to be. Your name is going to be a part of every family tree to come. There is no one about whom you will be able to say, they're not mine. Thieves, liars, the first-class citizens and the bottom feeders, you might not like them all Abram, but you'll have to find a way to claim them all." And from today, the well-known story of the ten commandments. A covenant story. God writing down a list of divine demands.

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me...Do not make or bow down to any idols, for I am a jealous God who wants you all to myself...Honor your father and mother...Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, for not working can be holier than working...Do not murder...Do not lie or steal...Do not take—no—don't

even want what your neighbor has. This is how it's going to be. Do this and you shall live. Don't do this and you shall die.

There is no concession on God's part, no back-up plan for what to do should your mother or father be a terrible mother or father and not worthy of being honored. No qualifying statement on what to do should you join the army and be sent to kill another person. Never mind that by the time God gave the ten commandments to the Israelites, they'd already broken every one of them and would surely do so again. I've heard said, hang the Ten Commandments up in every school, every courthouse, every church. But we know that simply having them doesn't necessarily make us kinder or more loving or peaceful or more inclined to justice, nor does having them make it any easier to actually follow them. God knew then what we know now, that laws alone are not what are going to save us or keep us safe. They cannot make us to get along. Only covenant can do that. Covenant.

Yesterday morning, with the wind still howling in my neighborhood and the trees still rocking back and forth, I left my cold, dark home and drove to Dunkin Donuts to get a hot cup of coffee and a couple bagels to eat. When I got there, I met the entire town of Attleboro. The line was out the door. It was only 8:15 and already all the donuts and almost all the bagels were gone. Luckily, just as I neared the front of the line, a worker came out from the back of the store carrying a tray of freshly baked bagels. The woman in line in front of me sighed a sigh of relief and said, "I'll take 2 dozen of those."

The 15 people behind her, who heard her give her order, sighed a sigh of contempt. And that's when something most curious happened. The woman looked behind her and then, turning back to the cashier, said, "No wait, I'll just take 2."

"Are you sure? I mean, you just said you wanted 2 dozen."

"Yes, I'm sure. You still have a lot of people to feed. I really just need 2." She took her two bagels, handed the young girl behind the counter a \$20 and walked away. Do you know what we call that? I think you do. I think you know exactly what we call that. We call that covenant. Looking beside you and behind you to see who else is there and then saying, I'll take less so other can have more. We call that covenant.

Paul's has another word for it. In his letter to the church at Corinth he calls it, foolish saving. "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the sage? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? Just look at Jesus crucified on the cross. Ha! A stumbling block, a sign of foolishness. Yet we proclaim that this One who has given his life, who has gotten in line with us and cast his lot with us, who has taken less so others may have more, by this One we are saved. Foolishness!" Who would believe it? Would you? I dare you to show me that you believe it!

Amen.