

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church on
October 8, 2023.**

SHALL & SHALL NOT

<Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 80:7-15; Matthew 21:33-46>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I have, in my study, one of those little polished rocks that has an inspirational word etched on it. You know the kind - they say things like “dream,” or “wonder,” or “imagine.” And in my opinion there’s nothing wrong with those, so long as it’s a word that speaks to you on a notable level. But the rock that I have on the shelf upstairs has, etched in gold colored paint, the word “Credo.”

I wouldn’t necessarily expect anyone to be familiar with it, but Credo is an event for Presbyterian ministers, put on by the denomination, to provide rest and renewal as well as guidance and support for ministry. You have to be invited to it, and it’s usually within a certain window of time in your ministry. I was able to go to Credo a few years ago, which is where I received this rock. But Credo is more than just the name of the event. Credo, from which we draw our English word “creed,” is more generally defined and understood as, “Way of Living.” Credo, then, is not just an invitation to a ten day retreat; it is also an invitation to reflect and determine one’s own “Way of Living.”

It might be more readily approached and understood if I asked, “What are some words to live by that you find beneficial?” Such as, “to thine own self be true,” or “a penny saved is a penny earned,” or even “early to bed, early to rise, make’s one healthy wealthy and wise.” You get the idea. More than an aphorism, though, a credo goes deeper, touching more on a way of living that reflects an individual’s, or even a community’s, identity and value system.

For example, take St. Francis, whose feast day was celebrated in the church earlier this week. Francis, the son of a wealthy silk merchant, would come to eschew that lifestyle in order to follow God. His rule of life become one of humble simplicity and a desire to not only see but lift up the image of God in all creation and the presence of God in all situations. His credo was such that it has inspired millions of people to follow in the Franciscan Way in the millennia since Francis first determined to follow God.

If I were to ask you what your own credo is, how might you answer? Or perhaps a more necessary initial question might be, have you considered what your own credo might be? Because I think our Scripture readings this morning are inviting us to consider our credo, as individuals and as a community of faith.

The need to address this question, and the beginnings of an answer, was being realized for the people of God in the wilderness. Still in the process of learning and determining what it meant to again be a people of God, and not a people of bondage and slavery, God realized that there was needed a guideline to living - both as a people with each

other, and as a people with God. Any of the old ways of understanding and determining one's life were no longer adequate - at best they were practices for survival. And while survival is not to be dismissed, they are no longer called to be a people of survival and instead be a people of living. A people of thriving. A people of God. And so a new rule of life was needed. Toward such an end, Moses was called up onto the mountain and given the new rule of life, the new credo, to guide and enable the people to be the living people of a Living God.

And this is an important distinction to make, I believe, that these Ten Commandments were intended first to be a guide to help a people, individually and communally, be a people of God and a people of life. It's important to follow this credo, certainly, to honor what God is saying about how we live - as individuals, as community, with each other and with God. There are things that, as such a people, we should do and that we shouldn't do. Ultimately, though, these commandments are not an end in and of themselves. They are a beginning for us to live into the fullness of life toward which we are called and invited. These commandments, shall's and shall not's, enable us to be a people who more readily recognize the image of God in each other and the presence of God around us. For my understanding, this is perhaps the best glimpse we have of God's credo for creation: to live in such a way that we more fully recognize the image of God in each other and the presence of God all around us.

And that's one of the reasons that Jesus' parable of wicked tenants is so condemning. Because this is a lesson that we, as a species, are in constant need of learning and relearning. The parable speaks directly to this, particularly calling attention to the fact that this credo of God is not being realized.

Jesus is still speaking primarily to the chief priests and elders of the Temple, challenging them to reflect on their role and their identity in light of the new thing God is doing in and through Jesus, a new thing which, so far, these same leaders have largely been resistant to and skeptical of recognizing. Jesus is trying to get them to understand, however, that such realities are leading not to life, as we are called, but to death. In the parable it is portrayed in the literal deaths of the servants and then even the son of the vineyard owner. But again, the broader distinction is that the tenants of the vineyard do not recognize the image of God within the ones sent to them. In their own desire and greed, they lift themselves above the community which is called to be the exemplar of faithful living, and in such, they ignore the *Imago Dei*, and thus ignore life. Their credo has become misguided and skewed. One could even say it was perverted. Why? Because they no longer recognized the *Imago Dei*, the image of God inherent within each person and within all aspect of creation.

This parable begs two related questions from us, even two-thousand some years later: Where do we find it easy to recognize Christ in others, and where do we find it challenging to recognize Christ in others?

The Ten Commandments began a baseline of relating to one another in faithful community, beyond survival, so that the people could begin to again recognize the presence of God in each other and among them all. In order to recognize the presence of God, in order to honor God among us, you shall do this, you shall not do that. Jesus

calls attention to the difficult-to-hear reality that, even with the best intentions, we have strayed from this. The stone, as he says, that the builders reject will become the cornerstone; that from which we have strayed will again become the foundation for what is to be built, and we see the vision of this edifice more and more as we learn and practice recognizing Christ in each other, and in all whom we meet.

Madeleine L'Engle, who is truly one of my favorite authors and Twentieth century theologians, wrote once about her own personal, daily credo. She began her morning in the same routine, which included taking her dog for a walk while she mentally went through her "alphabet of prayers," as she put it. In her book *And It Was Good*, she reflects on her credo in this way:

"As I walk I say my memorized alphabet of prayers, which helps clear my mind of trivialities. In the morning as I come to the words '...because in the mystery of the Word made flesh...' I look at whomever is nearest me so that I may see in that person, for that moment, Christ" [*And It Was Good*, p56].

Our individual credos, our "way of living," will be unique to each of us. But in the community of faith, our credo should be such that we are challenged and encouraged to recognize Christ in those around us. Not just on Sunday morning, but on every morning. Not just in the people we know, but in the people we don't know. We are not just called to live in this way but we are also fully equipped to live this out. In this we shall live, and we shall not do any less. Amen.