

<Exodus 20:1-4, 8-9, 12-20; Psalm 19:1-14; 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.*

We've come again to the fullness of the season of autumn, as fall slowly unfolds around us in every which way. Here in Western New York, of course, that means that apples and pumpkins everywhere are highlighted by the changing of leaves on the trees as they prepare for their winter death and slumber. Here in Western New York it means predictions of snow and bated-breath waiting on the weekly football matchup. Here in Western New York, fall means crisper air and a feeling that can be immediately recognized and seldom adequately described.

Here in the church, the arrival of fall and the beginning of October bring with it certain signs, as well. We come again to Christ's Table not just as a church but as a global communion of faithful and seeking disciples as we recognize and remember World Communion Sunday. We celebrate the offering of Sunday School and mission projects and the upcoming arrival of the Advent season which is, astoundingly, only eight weeks away.

But in the world at large, one hallmark of the arrival of fall is the return of The Great British Baking Show or, as we might know it better here in the United States, British Bake Off. And if you are unfamiliar with this phenomenon, the premise is straightforward: twelve amateur bakers are invited to join an annual baking competition, bringing their skills, talents, and passion to the kitchen in an attempt to impress the judges. Each week, one baker is removed from the mix until a winner is crowned.

The show has become an international sensation, and an invitation to truly feel-good television in a time when much of television brings us elevated stress or heart-rates. And for me, I have found that the weekly tuning in during the fall season creates in me a desire to try and replicate what I see the bakers doing on tv. Because it always looks so simple. So straightforward. And these are not professional bakers; every one of them has a full personal and professional life outside of this baking competition. Surely, if they can do it, I can do it, right? All it requires is the simple act of following a recipe and doing what it tells you to do.

Right?

Anyone who has been a baker, and I know there are several of you in the congregation right now, or anyone who has practiced anything similar to baking, such as art or design or building, knows that it is never that simple. Never that straightforward. But we certainly want it to be that way. We humans, as a species, almost instinctively yearn for an ability to simplify life down to a set of instructions to follow, a recipe that would bring about satisfaction and fulfillment.

And I worry that we have journeyed in that direction as we consider our relationship with the Ten Commandments, the inception of which comes to us again as our first Scripture reading this morning. I say this as an observation more than a criticism, but it is an observation that invites a change, a growing in our understanding and development.

Some several thousand years ago when the people of God were journeying through the wilderness, and journeying anew toward being the people of Israel, they were in what felt like a messy situation. Having lived for generations as slaves and servants in Egypt, they had forgotten how to live with any other identity. Everything seemed foreign and uncertain, even the call and the need to trust God to lead them forward, just as God had led them out by Moses. In this state of being, in a time of journey and transition, nothing seemed certain and clear-cut, and everything felt messy and complicated. They wanted to live as God's people, they wanted to live with each other in this newly created reality, but they weren't sure how; they needed some guidance, a recipe of sorts, and so God gave them the Ten Commandments.

If you live by these practices, then you will be on the path toward living with each other as my people, for all the world to see.

Because as most any baker will tell you, the recipe is a guide, not an equation, and certainly not the thing itself. Baking requires a certain amount of leeway and even creativity as you move through the recipe, and even if you follow the recipe exactly on Tuesday, doing so again on Friday does not guarantee the exact same result. The difference, however, is made up in the lived experience of practice, and that is precisely what God is offering the people: a framework within which to practice, daily, at living as God's people.

We, as humans tend to do all too readily, have confused the recipe, the framework, for the practice itself, and have equated the following of the framework with the end result. We have come to a point of beginning to believe that if we just follow the Ten Commandments to the letter then we will have the fullness of life for which we yearn. And there's truth in that, but the commandments are not the end result in and of themselves; they are the framework which, when practiced, will open us up to the fullness of life in community and communion. They are the pathway, the intermediary to the desired end result.

The Pharisees, likewise, have confused the practice with the end result. Jesus' staunchest criticisms in the gospels come to the religious leaders who have perfected the practice and raised that up as the end result, in and of itself. We see that again here in this reading from Matthew's gospel, continuing where we left off last week. Building off of that teaching to the religious leaders - in which he questions them to get a definitive answer about John the Baptist and then poses a parable of which son did what his father asked - building on that encounter Jesus poses another parable for them.

In this one, we see the story of a landowner who builds what should be a prosperous, ready-to-produce operation and then signs it over to tenants to work it. The recipe is in place, with the theory being that if they just follow the steps then everything they imagine will come to be realized. Except that it cannot be simplified to just a following of the steps. The tenants, as we learn, can follow the steps but they cannot engage in right relationship with the emissaries of the owner, or even the owner's son. The steps of the practice alone are hollow and without effect if they are not paired with the greater practice toward which they point, which is the fullness of life and relationship.

The chief priests and Pharisees themselves proclaim that the owner would be within his rights to “put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” And then the chief priests and the Pharisees come to realize that Jesus is referring to them as the wicked tenants, because they, too, have made the framework, the guiding principles the end result, rather than what the framework leads us to. The Pharisees have lifted up the incorrect thing, and have confused the recipe for the cake itself.

That's not an unfamiliar outcome. Even though we have a framework that points us toward life, we want to simplify, and in the process, we often mistake the framework for the end result. The antidote to this is to keep practicing, to keep leaning into the complex and nuanced and messy. To keep creating. Whenever we are tempted to claim the recipe as the end result, let us re-engage with creating something. Irish poet and theologian Padraig O Tuama writes of such times in life when he says, “Here is what I know: when that bell tolls again, I need to go and make something, anything: a poem, a pie, a terrible scarf with my terrible knitting. I need to write a letter, remind myself of any little lifeline around me’ (*The Lifeline*).

The practices of faith and religious life, even the Ten Commandments, are not life itself. Living by them, and practicing them, striving to faithfully incorporate them into our daily life will point us in the right direction and help us along the way, but we must also make that journey. It is tempting and easy to hold up these commandments and say, ‘this is life,’ but that does not account for the living, and makes an idol out of that which has been given as an aid.

As we come together again to the Table that has been prepared for us on this communion Sunday, this World Communion Sunday, we remember that we sit down together with brothers and sisters in faith from around the world. Professing their faith in different languages. Using different styles of bread. Singing different hymns. It's messy and chaotic, and rarely simple, but it is life. It is the very thing toward which we are called and enabled to journey. The relationships and connections and imperfections and creations bring out the fullness of life in and of themselves, and in all of it, God is present, creating alongside and amongst all of us, all the time. So come, let us come to the Table, let us journey together in faith, and let us and embrace the life that has been offered to the world. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*