

In Essentials—Unity  
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Some of us may have heard this passage a hundred times in our lives. The story of Moses, the people of Israel, God, and the 10 Commandments. Some of us may be picturing Charlton Heston as Moses, climbing up the mountain and the tablets being inscribed with that magical fiery writing. Or maybe these days we think about people fighting over where the 10 Commandments can be displayed, or asking if they should be displayed at all.

It's remarkable that these 10 rules written specifically for the Israelites concerning ethical questions they faced in their community and how they were to have a relationship with God, that these rules written thousands of years ago, have continued to perplex us ever since.

Will Rogers is credited with saying that, "The minute a thing is long and complicated it confuses. Whoever wrote the Ten Commandments made 'em short. They may not always be kept but they are understood." That explains in part the reason they have lasted the test of time—they are specific, they are concise, there are ten of them, not one hundred and four, and we in general understand what they mean, what the commandments are about.

- Don't worship other gods.
- Don't make any images, carved or otherwise, of God or any other deity that you decide to worship—which was really weird at the time because that's how people tended to worship their gods! Picture all the Egyptian gods and the Greek and Roman gods later in history and the images and statues that have been preserved from those civilizations.
- God says, "Don't take my name in vain."
- Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy—no one works, not even animals
- Honor your father and your mother, I'm sure all you parents out there just love this one
- Also, no murdering
- No cheating on your spouse
- No stealing
- No bearing false witness against your neighbor (don't lie about what your neighbor did or didn't do)
- And no coveting your neighbor's house, spouse, animals, stuff in general

So this week alone I broke two of the commandments. I didn't kill anybody or steal a car before you start getting nervous, but I was pretty snarky with my mom on the phone and since ministers don't get the Sabbath off, my Sabbath is supposed to be on Friday. And I didn't have great time management this week and ended up working on church stuff on my Sabbath, so there goes that commandment too.

To echo Will Rogers, I get the 10 commandments, I really do. I understand what they mean, what they say, and how I'm supposed to integrate them into my life. But you know, sometimes some of them are really hard to abide by. And try as I might, I fail miserably. I'm great at not

murdering people and not making carved images of God or Zeus or Poseidon. But for me, keeping a Sabbath and remembering to rest as God rested; well I'm horrible at that. I'm also thinking that I'm not the only one here who doesn't take time to rest, even though God set this fantastic example for all of us by taking a day to stop working—or you know, creating the universe, same difference.

We all may fail to adhere to the 10 Commandments in various ways, so I hope that I'm not the only admittedly repentant sinner in this sanctuary all by myself. Maybe you saw your neighbor's new sports car or new addition on their house and you got a little jealous, a little covetous. Maybe you got really mad this week and said some curses that God might not appreciate too much. There will be times when we don't keep all 10 of the 10 Commandments even if we're striving to do so.

And I think that God understands that. But I also don't think it's an excuse for bad behavior, for thinking that God will forgive us, so we can lie about something that co-worker we don't like did to get him in trouble. Or I can admire my neighbor's possessions all I want because I'm not going to actually steal them and break another commandment while I'm at it.

There are some who emphasize that these are the 10 commandments, not the 10 suggestions. And God certainly doesn't seem to take these commandments lightly in the passage Bob read to us from Exodus—with all that thunder and lighting and the mountain smoking and the people yelling out to Moses, "But let not God speak with us, lest we die!" This seems like pretty serious stuff if you ask me.

What I find interesting is that some folks think that the 10 Commandments may have actually served as a creed of sorts—this is how it tends to be viewed by some people even today in Judaism and Christianity.

Some of you may already be bristling a bit; being good Congregationalists you know that our tradition is non-creedal on purpose. Some of our religious ancestors were even known to shout out, "No creed but Christ!" when arguing with other Christians about theological matters. We don't do creeds in the UCC, it's true. We have a Statement of Faith and the Preamble of our United Church of Christ Constitution—these are the two places where our theology is laid out and we say, this is what we really believe and these are the beliefs that unify us as a denomination. We like to say that we believe in testaments of faith not tests of faith.

So we hear that the 10 Commandments function as a creed, a creed that both Jews and Christians share, and we may already begin squirming inside because that's cool and everything, but we just don't like creeds. Some of you former Catholics may even be having flashbacks to having to study the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed.

But creed, taken from the Latin word *credo* means "a formal statement of religious belief; a confession of faith" or "a system of belief." In some respects, we have to have some unifying creeds in every religion to bring us together in our diversity. As I said, we in the UCC don't hold to creeds like other Christians may, they are not tests of faith that we adhere to and believe in fully. But we do acknowledge their importance and adhere to them as a belief system of which we are a part, even if that's just acknowledging that we share a historical Christian heritage and we remain kin in Christ.

In this way, we can also acknowledge that the 10 Commandments are a great system of belief that we should probably still be adhering to all these years later, because most of these rules especially the rules that really talk about how human beings should be relating to one another just make good sense and are part of being a decent and ethical human being. And this is a belief system we share with both fellow Christians and Jews.

And this is important for us to remember in our specifically Christian tradition today, because this is World Communion Sunday where Christians throughout the world are sharing communion in their communities and with us too. No one makes us adhere to this global Christian observance of communion. The United Church of Christ certainly can't make us observe it, but we do. Why?

I like it because it's this really powerful statement of Christian unity and belief. We may not exactly adhere to all the creeds like other denominations. But we are united around Christ's table, we're united around this idea that even if we believe different things about communion itself—whether it's a symbolic meal, or the real presence of Christ is there, or it's actually the body and blood of Christ miraculously transformed, we are still all here around the table. We are still here to partake and share and pray be with one another in our blessed diversity of belief, in this very community at Pilgrim and in solidarity with all Christians throughout America and the world.

There are beliefs we share within the United Church of Christ, beliefs we share with other Christians, and we do share the 10 Commandments with our Jewish neighbors and friends. On all these levels, there's a common heritage. We in the UCC should understand this unified diversity of belief on a deeper level than most because we are a uniting and united denomination ourselves, with four predecessor denominations making us who we are today and shaping our belief system and the way that we uniquely do church.

One of our predecessor traditions, the German Evangelicals who arrived on the American frontier in the nineteenth century brought with them a form of pietism, a religion of the heart. The Evangelicals had a zeal for mission and a yearning for peace and reconciliation because many of them were fleeing from some of the religious wars in Germany at the time. These situations and beliefs allowed them to coin a motto, and it remains the motto of Eden Theological Seminary, one of our UCC seminaries in St. Louis Missouri, of Evangelical heritage. The phrase is simply and profoundly, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."

In essentials—like the 10 commandments, and recognizing the importance of the ancient creeds, and gathering around Christ's table as the body of Christ from many cultures and nations—there is a great deal of unity here. In non-essentials, both in global Christianity, and dare I say even in the United Church of Christ and at Pilgrim Church, let's have some liberty in those non-essentials. But I pray that we always frame these conversations, these beliefs, these differences in charity. May it be so with us, this day and always. Amen.