

Who are we?
By Rev. Jessica Gregory
World Communion Sunday
October 2, 2011

Isaiah 5:1-7

5Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ²He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. ³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Matthew 21:33-46

³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” ⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

When I was growing up, it was not unusual for my family to have colleagues of my dad’s over for dinner. Often folks came in from out of town to do business and my parents often offered them hospitality. Sometimes individuals would stay the night, depending on their travel plans. My brother and I enjoyed when these visitors came over because it meant that there would be a good dessert and that we could stay up a little later than usual, playing quietly downstairs while the adults talked.

I remember one visitor in particular. He stayed with us when I was ten years old. He was a big man with a round belly and glasses. I don't remember his name, but I know it was one I had not heard before, and he was German. I remember his accent and how it was difficult for me to understand him. I also remember that he was a terrific artist. He could draw detailed black and white pencil sketches of ordinary objects in the most extraordinary yet simple way. He was different than Dad's other colleagues.

Through my ten-year-old eyes, he was large and mysterious, and therefore scary. Honestly, I was afraid of him! I remember staying up that night and crying, sure that this man was going to kidnap me and take me away from my home, my family and my friends. My mom tried to assure me that this gentleman was a friend and everything was going to be fine. But I had my mind made up. This man was going to hurt me. An avid reader, I had read many Nancy Drew mysteries about kidnapppers and I was pretty sure that I was going to be a real live mystery case, when my parents discovered me missing in the morning. Sometimes our imaginations can really get the best of us! I had worked myself into a real tizzy, all the while, the gentleman is sleeping right across the hall from me in the guest bedroom, no doubt hearing my carrying on.

How easy it is to reject someone who is different!

I finally fell asleep that night and awoke-big surprise- safely in my bed, sun shining through the window. I went downstairs for breakfast, long after the gentleman and my dad had left for work. While I was eating my english muffin my mom gave me a sketch the man had made for me, of a great big teddy bear wearing a top hat. As I looked at the teddy bear I remember feeling so embarrassed for my behavior the night before. This man was not a kidnapper!- he was a kind man who happened to be from another country. Unfortunately for me, I spent the little time I had in his company fearing him and pushing him away.

Unfortunately for all of us, this story is a personal experience with a reality that has always existed for humankind. Even as we are created in God's own image, we quickly forget that our neighbors far and near are also created by God. In rejecting one another, we push away God. As a world, a country and a community, we have done this over and over again. We have rejected, ridiculed, and even killed those who are unlike us in their looks, their beliefs, their culture, or their sexual orientation. The United States enslaved Africans...took land and life from the Native American people...and forced relocation and internment on the Japanese Americans.

A more recent example closer to home: In 1999 Benjamin Nathaniel Smith, a member of the white supremacist Creativity Movement, got rid of the "other" in a tragic string of events this community cannot forget. On July 2 African-American and former Northwestern Basketball coach Ricky Birdsong was jogging near his Skokie home with his 8-year-old son and his 10-year-old daughter, when Smith shot him. Over a span of a few days, Smith also killed a Korean-American college student, and wounded six Orthodox Jewish men in nearby West Rogers Park, three other black men including a minister, and a Taiwanese immigrant, and then took his own life before he could be captured by the police.

Such violence and death is in our Gospel reading for this morning. This parable, often referred to as the "Wicked Tenants" is one filled with rejection, hate, hurt and despair. Feelings similar to those being experienced by Matthew's community. Matthew's gospel was written between forty and fifty years after Jesus' death, and those Jews following Christ were being oppressed and discriminated against by the traditional Jews in their community. They were in a place of isolation, fear and discouragement. The traditional Jews, once their friends, were treating them like Jesus and his followers were treated by the chief priests and elders. Matthew and his cohorts had become the "other" within their own community. There was much for them to connect with in our story for this morning.

This parable, and the other two in the series, respond to the chief priest and leaders' challenge of Jesus' authority. All three of these stories are told to the leaders, not to a crowd of people. It is the leaders who are enforcing oppression of the Jews who are following Christ.

Scholars say this parable is an allegory, a story in which every word and image stands for something other than what is actually being said at the time. We know that God is the landowner. With great care, God "planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower." There was intentionality to keep the vineyard in good repair, adding the fence, the wine press and the watchtower. God did everything possible to cultivate a vineyard that would yield grapes.

When God's work was finished though, he leased it tenants, and, trusting these men, as the parable states "went to another country". These tenants are the Pharisees, or, as translated in Hebrew "the separated ones." These are religious leaders of the day. Harvest time comes, God sends slaves, three different times, to collect the produce. These slaves, we know, represent prophets and martyrs who have died for the faith through the years. The tenants rejected all the slaves the Landowner sent. With each slave's visit, the rejection takes a more violent form than the last, with the final slave, God's son, being killed by the tenants (Lovette 9.27.11).

Violence and death. A difficult story that, if you are like me, you'd rather read quickly and move along to more comfortable scripture, like The Greatest Commandment passage in chapter 22. But here we are with the Wicked tenants. On World Communion Sunday, of all Sundays.

World Communion Sunday is a creation of the Presbyterian Church, who dedicated a Sunday to mark the unity of the church and a hope for peace in the world in 1936. It was designed to become an ecumenical service and was picked up by the National Council of Churches in 1940. Pretty ironic timing, as we think of what happened over the next five years in Europe...a time when 6 million Jews were exterminated for being what those in power knew only has "other". (Weir, 2005, 9.27.11)

Since its creation in 1936 World Communion Sunday celebrations have taken many forms, from being primarily for missionaries and evangelism. Today more emphasis is on celebrating the connection we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world and how we can serve God together to bring about peace. After all, as Mike mentioned in his sermon last week, according to Rev. Dan McNerney of the Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, whose call to ministry in part is to develop mission initiatives overseas, only 30% of Christians are in North America. 70% are on other continents, sending their missionaries here! The American Church is now very far from the center of the world, whether or not we realize it.

And yet, World Communion Sunday remains. And I give thanks to God that it does. In this time of warring nations, debt crisis, and fear so dark that trusting one's self is difficult and trusting God, at times all but impossible. Living in such space, it is so easy to forget who we are. It is easier to push away and to reject than it is to be vulnerable to another and welcome them into your life. It is easier to label someone as "other" than to understand their ideas...their perspective...their beliefs. And when the simple task of living takes so much energy, taking the easy way out when possible makes sense. It's not that we intend to be like the tenants, rejecting God, but in the end, we all have our tenant-like moments.

That is why coming to this table is so very important. We need to embrace God. We need to be reconciled to a God who created us and has cared for us more deeply than we know to be possible. A God who forgives us when we confess all the ways we have rejected the "other," even when that "other" is ourselves and how we have rejected our maker. A God who deeply desires us to live as God intends. To this end, as is written in the prophetic book of Jeremiah, God says, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (31:33) We are God's people. And, despite how isolated we might feel as we navigate through our weeks, we are not alone. This table, this Sunday celebrates the vastness of global church community and the power within

it! World Communion Sunday remains to remind us of the Christian bond that is international. It reminds us of what we want our world to be, and of who we, as Christians want to be. Who we are. Sisters and brothers in faith shining the light of God's love in places of deep darkness.

This is a reminder that we need, because even though we desire to shine brightly God's peace, hope and love, in reality, many times we forget that we are a light at all. This reminder is real and concrete- we raise the cup to our mouths and we smell the sweetness of grapes. When the bread touches our tongue we taste the grains from the earth. As our senses come alive so too does our awareness of God's Spirit surrounding us, and of God's son, sent for us. We celebrate that the violence of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants is not the end- that the Pharisees did not have ultimate victory over God's son, even through killing him.

We celebrate, as we partake of this sacrament, that it is a beginning. A beginning of a new week, a new month, a new start to living a life with a vision of shalom: A preacher and writer, Robin Meyers describes in his book *Saving Jesus from the Church*, "More than just the absence of war, *shalom* is a pervasive well-being that reflects the absence of oppression, anxiety and fear and is characterized by health, wholeness, prosperity and security. It is God's dream made manifest 'on earth as it is in heaven.'" But it belongs to *everyone*, just as it is everyone's responsibility (2009 168).

I urge you to take this responsibility seriously. When you walk out of the church doors this morning, do so prepared to, in one concrete way, make your life and another's life more healthy, whole, prosperous and secure. The founder of the Methodist church, John Wesley, put it simply: "Get on your knees because much depends on God. Get on your feet because much depends on you."

A bumper sticker too, makes the point clear: "The world you desire comes not by chance but by change."

It is amazing the difference one letter can make! (McMickle 2010 145)

And so too, what one simple, nourishing meal can make.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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