

**Amazing in Our Eyes**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
**October 2, 2005 World Communion**  
**Text: Matthew 21:33-46**

The distinctive rhythms of drumbeat greeted us long before we could see the gathered Mekane Yesus congregation in Gambela, Ethiopia. Our visit last year brought us to the Presbyterian mission outpost where Dr. Dan and Jane Reynolds had served. As we entered the compound in the fading daylight, we heard voices singing praise to God, as choir members holding candles lined the drive, welcoming us. Reflecting on the moving experience with our group later, I remarked at what a tribute it was to these two living saints. While taking nothing away from the regard the Ethiopians have for Dan and Jane, I think elder Tom Allen's comment captured it better. He said, "Their greeting was a powerful example of Christian hospitality—like coming home to your family after a long absence."

Today we celebrate world communion, and I can't improve on the vision of coming home to your family, as we gather around the Lord's Table. In a world fractured by division, scarred by conflict, and wounded by arrogance, this meal speaks of acceptance and reconciliation, unity and peace. Since daybreak broke over the tiny South Pacific islands of Kiribati and Samoa, and continuing throughout this day's turning, the Church will break bread and drink the cup, signifying the life we share through Jesus Christ. The Presbyterian Church has mission co-workers in 68 of those countries, and active partnerships and projects in 50 more. This meal unites us with them, as well as brothers and sisters of all denomination and tradition, race and ethnicity. It is as if everywhere is home, and you're welcome at the table, because no matter who you are, you're family.

The morning gospel reading is a parable Jesus told that reveals the spiritual foundation uniting and blessing all the families of the earth. But there's judgment too, and warning, when that foundation is rejected. Here the Kingdom of God is envisioned as a vineyard, farmed by tenants.... and the grape harvest has arrived. Listen for God's word to the Church in the reading found on p. 24 of the chapel/pew Bibles, from the gospel according to Matthew in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter at the 33<sup>rd</sup> verse. [21:33-46]

When I first read this text, I wanted to high-tail it back to the Grand Canyon! It's hard to see how it has anything to do with us or the family of faith, let alone our global connections and essential unity.

Biblical scholars interpret this parable as an allegory, rich in detail. A landowner plants a vineyard with his own hands, puts a fence around it, adds a winepress and even constructs a watchtower for protection. Then he hires tenants to farm it. It seems pretty clear at first: God is certainly the landowner. The slaves sent to collect the produce represent the prophets who have been killed for speaking unwelcome truth to God's people. The owner's son who is murdered by the tenants is Jesus himself.

And the tenants? Also easy to discern from the reading: the Pharisees, those religious leaders who rejected everyone whom God had sent to teach and direct them. Jesus engages them with the story, drawing them in with the familiar symbol of the vineyard, understood at that time as a reference to the house of Israel, God's chosen people. His posing the punch line as a question means that the know-it-all religious leaders actually pronounce judgment upon themselves. *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.* The Pharisees "get it" too—when they realize Jesus' harsh words are directed at them, they conspire to plot his arrest and silencing. To the Church's shame, this text has been offered historically as evidence that the Jewish rejection of Jesus as

Messiah resulted in the covenant promises being taken away from them and given to the Church.

But watch out! How much easier it is to believe in God's judgment when it seems to be directed at someone else. There's plenty of that going around these days. And I'm not speaking primarily about the state of interfaith relations. The Christian community assails its different parts with charges of God's displeasure and judgment. Hardly a day goes by that I don't receive a mailing from the Ohio Restoration Project, a statewide effort to organize 1000 Ohio "Patriot Pastors" who will recruit a network of so-called value voters. The well-funded group defines morality by way of literal reading of the Bible, and characterizes the constitutional separation of church and state as "godless" and faith communities who disagree as apostate. On the other hand, those of us who describe our theological perspective as "progressive" find it too easy to dismiss these adversaries as false prophets. How much easier it is to imagine God judging their self-righteousness than my own; their misguided zeal than the mainline's tentative witness. To interpret this text only in its original context is to ignore its meaning for us today. Since the Church has been given the stewardship of God's Kingdom, could Jesus' warning to the Pharisees apply with equal force to us?

In the parable the landowner sent representatives to the tenants to collect what was owed. What do God's people owe to God? God gave us an abundance of resources to steward, and unlimited potential for productivity. What kind of tenants have we been? Though we might apply this question to any number of aspects of our lives, both personal and corporate, on this World Communion Sunday I invite us to consider it with respect to the kind of community we are building of Fairmount Presbyterian Church. Have we given all that God is due? Are the fruits of the kingdom evident in righteous living, human caring, and courageous witnessing? Our tenancy is not one based on privilege or pedigree, but of service. We share the promise God gave to Abraham and Sarah that their descendants would become "a blessing to all the families of

the earth.” This is our calling, intentionally specified in our congregation’s mission statement, to “grow as an inviting, caring and challenging community of adults, youth and children” for the purpose of making a difference in the world.

What kind of tenants have we been? Do we see ourselves directing our prayer and care toward neighbors who cannot or will not pray for themselves? Is the sanctuary a spiritual refuge for insiders who have no special interest in those who remain – by choice or by chance—outside? Our identity is no cause for arrogance, but rather deep humility. We are to be stewards of God’s creation in ways that bear fruit: and I think that means extending hospitality such that many kinds of people find a welcome here, and feel that they are coming home to family after a long absence.

The Church Growth Task Force – elders and other members who have spent the past nine months researching church growth strategies—will be making their report and recommendations to the Session in a few weeks. Part of their study has been of demographic trends in the Heights communities, and pondering who we need to be reaching out towards as potential new members. Near-by neighbors? Graduate students and young adults? Families with children; families with youth? People of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds? Gay and lesbian persons? Seekers and self-proclaimed secular humanists? Is our welcome wide enough?

The answer to that question lies, of course, not in our own self-confidence or good intentions. It’s not about progressive theology or political correctness. It’s not even finally about church growth or institutional survival. It is about God’s amazing grace poured out upon the people of a vineyard that is God’s property, not ours. For God so loved the world, that God sent the Son for its life. We encounter Jesus—the stone that so many have rejected—and see that he is the foundation, the cornerstone. He is the center that holds, the one in whom we trust come Hell or high water. The workers in the parable are described as “wretches” when they forgot who owned the

vineyard. And it's true they acted abominably. But here's the good news: God inexplicably saves wretches, wicked ones, and plain old garden-variety sinners. It's the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes.

A colleague told about an announcement in her church's weekly newsletter saying that next Sunday the church would celebrate the Lord's Supper. A visitor to the church with no church background saw the notice and called up my friend. "I have two questions," she said. "It's about this supper thing. Am I invited, and how much will it cost?" [*Living by the Word, by Roger Lovette, in The Christian Century, September 20, 2005*]

The world is still asking these questions. Can we come? How much will this cost? We remember that this is not "our" table—this is not a Fairmount table, or even a Presbyterian one. We approach this Table in precisely the same condition: as sinners in need of God's grace; the bread of life, the cup of salvation. There should be no sense of entitlement about God's grace, only gratitude. This isn't a country club; it's the family Table. We are the servers and the meal is ready.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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