

"Making Peace in the Vineyard."

Ex. 20; Ps. 19; Matt. 21:33-46
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
World Communion Sunday, October 5, 2008

On this World Communion Sunday our eyes are drawn to the Lord's Table. Jesus is the host and he invites us to come and share in the bountiful goodness of the Lord.

Echoing the words of the 23rd Psalm, it is a Table prepared and spread in the presence of God's enemies. We are the ones who continually break the Law of God we have just read. We are the ones who treat the vineyard of creation as though it belonged solely to us. We use and abuse the gifts of life and pridefully pursue our own selfish advantage.

It is to people just like us that Christ extends his hands in love and in welcome and in peace. The only peace possible in this vineyard must come from God.

We don't understand God's ways. If we were in charge, we would settle scores and even up sin-filled accounts. When Jesus asks his listeners what should be done to the wicked tenants they respond out of their experience in such things: They say "Torture and a hideous death would be too good for them! Teach those scoundrels a lesson!"

But God's answer is different. God's answer to our violence is to nail it down, once and for all on a cross. God's answer is to call enemies - friends. God's answer is to make peace with us so that we, in turn, can open our arms and our hearts to our neighbors and strive to be peacemakers, for Jesus' sake.

On this World Communion Sunday it seems fitting to share a story of a communion celebration presided over by Bruce Rigdon, who for many

years was a professor at McCormick Seminary and who was also the pastor at Grosse Pointe Memorial Church outside of Detroit. He recalls:

"It was a Saturday night. The church was packed - - with people even standing in the aisles - the largest wedding I'd ever experienced at Gross Pointe.

"The service was beautiful. We prayed not only that God's Holy Spirit would create a loving unity between bride and groom, but also that in God's shalom they could take the risks of hospitality, of reaching out in love to others.

"After their exchange of promises, I moved to the Communion table, grateful that the couple had chosen to begin their marriage by sharing bread and cup. I reminded all who had gathered that Christ, present in this time of joy and celebration, had in his gift of bread and wine made all our tables holy. Then I proceeded, as is our custom, to invite all who had been baptized and who loved the Lord, to come forward to celebrate by intinction.

"As I suddenly became aware that everyone in this crowd was coming forward, I remembered asking the couple if they had thought about how we'd handle such a diverse group. 'Yes,' they had replied. 'We have no idea, but we're sure you'll know what to do.' At that moment, with baptized and unbaptized alike streaming forward, I didn't know. I wondered what I should do. Should I raise my hand and say, 'You didn't understand my instructions - only those who are baptized are to come forward!' The simple fact of hospitality made that impossible. So I welcomed all who came.

"I noticed that many who were coming forward had tears in their eyes, and I myself was not entirely emotionally stable. I was perplexed, and

it was with mixed feelings after worship that I moved toward the reception room.

"I was immediately approached by an elderly man and woman. 'May we speak with you, Pastor?' Their faces were so earnest that it was not possible to do anything but give them full attention. 'My name,' he said, 'is Jacob and this is my wife Miriam. We are children of Holocaust families.' They went on to say that they had lived their lives with a rule: Never enter a Christian church.

"But their love for the bride - 'like our own daughter', they said - had brought them here, even though 'anxious, uncomfortable, feeling something like panic. But as this service went on, we felt relaxed, warm, strangely at home in a place where we don't belong, and something which we can't explain happened.

"When you invited people to the table and everyone around us began to move, we couldn't remain seated. We know, Pastor, it's Jesus' table, not ours. But we were drawn, drawn by some kind of love, so please, we hope we haven't offended you or your community. But we were received at the table tonight and we were deeply moved.' By this time Jacob was weeping, and Miriam was weeping, and I was weeping and we embraced one another.

"Moments later another couple approached, identifying themselves as Moustafa and Munir, originally from Lebanon. 'So you know what our life has been like and why we're here. You know about the pain and bloodshed. We came tonight because we are very close to the bride and groom. We are, of course, Muslim.' They explained that at the Communion, their three children moved toward the table and, instead of stopping them, they joined them. 'We know we shouldn't have been there, but somehow, for us tonight, the war has ended.'"

Such is the power of God's love poured out in Jesus Christ that enemies are reconciled, neighbors are gathered and all experience the peace that only God can bring to the vineyard.

Jesus' story of the vineyard shows us our fearsome violence and God's risky love. The awesome price of God's hospitality is evidenced in the gift of Jesus' own life for us.

In Christ the war indeed has ended between God and humanity. The Son has laid down his life, even for the tenants who try to assert their ownership of the vineyard that doesn't belong to them.

Christ comes bringing peace to the vineyard and hope to the world. He announces, not the righteous vengeance of a wronged God, but the illogical, foolish, seemingly weak response of a God who will do whatever it takes to win us over with love.

Friends, God has made peace with us all and welcomes us to this table in peace on this World Communion Sunday, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.