

*Life for the World*

Matthew 21:33-46

Whitefish UMC

World Communion Sunday, October 5, 2008

- † For most of us, the very word “vineyard” has a romantic glow. It evokes trips to wine country, golden light, gauzy dreams of warm days, good food, and lazy evenings sampling the local produce.
- † Think of recent films such as “A Good Year” starring Russell Crowe in an uncharacteristically mellow role, who inherits his eccentric uncle’s vineyard in Provence and trades the hectic pace of a bonds trader for a vintner.
- † Then there’s the older, “A Walk in the Clouds,” with Keanu Reeves, who falls in love with a war widow pregnant and alone who needs to return to her family’s vineyard with her reputation intact.
- † Both films offer the vineyards as eye candy for the viewer, and as backdrops for romance and happy ever after endings. No wonder owning a vineyard is a dream for many folks caught in the rat race of urban commerce.
- † A couple of weeks ago, Tom and I met a young woman, eyes shining, who proudly proclaimed her ambition to own a vineyard before she was thirty. She, too, was guided by a vision of rolling hills, lush vines, warm sun, and low-hanging fruit.
- † But of course in Israel, in the days of Jesus, and even today, vineyards are simply working farms where people gain a living from the soil, producing a product. The farmers know how hard it is to produce a good grape. If you get it wrong, you’ll fail and lose your prestige.

- † If you get it right, you'll gain wealth and status. And who wouldn't want that? Why then, this awful parable from Jesus about a vineyard, about wicked tenants who only want what they believe is rightfully theirs. After all, they've done the work, they've endured the insects, the heat, the dry periods, the worry. They only want their just rewards.
- † Ah. But that's the point, isn't it. There are two different visions of just what those rewards should be. It's as if, to quote the words from one of Paul Newman's early movies, "What we have here is a failure to communicate."
- † Almost lost in the minute-by-minute news of the financial crisis in our country, Paul Newman's death did spark a few retrospective looks at his life and work. Who could forget the young Paul Newman in "Cool Hand Luke?" Handsome and charismatic, the film helped Newman make his mark as a consummate actor.
- † "Cool Hand Luke" was released in 1967 in the midst of my college years. What I remember most about it is the scene in which Paul Newman stuffs himself with hardboiled eggs—I'll bet those of you who have seen it remember that too. But I also remember his character foreshadowing his death when he lies in a grave, arms outstretched in an imitation of crucifixion.
- † There's more than one parallel between the Paul Newman's rebel Luke and Jesus, and I urge you to get the film again and look for similarities. But for now, let's focus on Jesus' frustration that he, too, has failed to adequately communicate his message of abundance and justice and wholeness for all people, all creation.

- † I'll be honest with you. I wish Jesus had never told this parable. It makes me uncomfortable, especially on a day when we are supposed to celebrate the fuzzy glow of our communion with people all over the world this Sunday.
- † But we ignore it at our peril. You see, when Jesus told this parable, it was just after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, according to Matthew's gospel. The people thought all the Bible stories were coming true at last; Jesus agreed, but the stories he had in mind were the dark ones, the strange ones, the songs of lament.
- † So he told them a story of his own, a clear echo of this well known prophetic poem from the prophet Isaiah:

*The one I love had a vineyard, a fine, well placed vineyard.  
He hoed the soil and pulled the weeds, and planted the very  
best vines.*

*He built a lookout, built a winepress, a vineyard to be proud of.  
He looked for a vintage yield of grapes, but for all his pains he  
got junk grapes.*

*Now listen to what I'm telling you, you who live in Jerusalem  
and Judah.*

*What do you think is going on between me and my vineyard?  
Can you think of anything I could have done to my vineyard  
that I didn't do?*

*When I expected good grapes, why did I get bitter grapes?*

*Well now, let me tell you what I'll do to my vineyard:  
I'll tear down its fence and let it go to ruin.*

*I'll knock down the gate and let it be trampled.  
I'll turn it into a patch of weeds, untended, uncared for—  
thistles and thorns will take over.  
I'll give orders to the clouds: "Don't rain on that vineyard  
ever!"*

*Do you get it? The vineyard of God is the country of Israel.  
All the men and women of Judah are the garden he was so  
proud of.  
He looked for a crop of justice and saw them murdering each  
other.  
He looked for a harvest of righteousness and heard only the  
moans of victims. (Isaiah 5: 1-7, The Message)*

- † This time, Jesus adds his own twist to the prophet's lament. God has sent his son to bring in the harvest, and he will be murdered for his trouble. "The stone which the builders rejected will become the cornerstone." Surely it was hard for Jesus' first hearers to mesh this dark prediction with their hopes of triumph that Palm Sunday.
- † But it's a familiar theme, echoed from the beginning of creation. God creates the lush and abundant garden, the vineyard that is earth, and gives it to human beings for their use and tending. All God asks in return is a relationship with them in which a portion of the fruits of their labor are given back to him in their time and their love.
- † But human beings have a better idea. They substitute their wisdom for God's. In fact, they seek to become like God, deciding who is in and who is out—who deserves to stay in the garden and receive its fruits, and who doesn't.

- † So what does this text have to do with World Communion Sunday, anyway? Aren't we supposed to be thinking happier thoughts? A little bit of history may shed light on the connection.
- † It was 1936 when the Presbyterians succeeded in enlisting other churches to mark the first Sunday of October as a day for unity and hope for peace. The National Council of Churches adopted the practice officially in 1940. Of course you know what happened next.
- † The following five years brought about the most devastating war in history, and six million Jews were exterminated. So much for the high-minded thoughts on unity and peace by the church.
- † But it takes more than a world war to wipe out the hopes of the church for unity and peace, and so here we are, 72 years after the first World Communion Sunday, undaunted in our hope.
- † What, then, must we do to realize the vision of World Communion and make it more than just a day of fun and food?
- † None of us wants to hear about the dire consequences of our failure to be good stewards of the earth or of our time and money and love. None of us wants to think about being cast out of the fullness of life and grace.
- † And yet we know that when we aren't mindful of our connection to one another and our need to extend that connection to care and compassion for all people as well as the earth, we prosper at our peril.
- † How can that be? We've all had a lesson in global economics in the past couple of weeks. Did you know that the word "economy" comes from the Greek word *oikos*, which means "household?" It has the same root as "ecology." Even our language makes the connection between stewardship of our money, our resources, and our earth.

- † Why not celebrate this connection by committing to change one thing about our spending habits and our use of resources so that we might return a portion of our lives to God’s dream for us as individuals and as God’s household?
- † As we prepare to receive communion with Christians around the globe, remember that it is Christ himself who promised: “I have come that all might have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10).
- † Thus it is his life in ours that gives life for the world. Maybe that beautiful dream of the fruitful vineyard isn’t so distant after all. As you come forward for communion, find your place among those who give themselves away that all may have abundant life.
- † For we remember....

Sources:

Dr. N. T. Wright, “The Vineyard and the Farms,” [www.westminster-abbey.org](http://www.westminster-abbey.org)

bloomingcactus: Matthew 21:33-46, “World Communion” for Sunday, October 2, 2005 at <http://bloomingcactus.typepad.com>