

At an isolated convent in the Swiss Alps, three nuns lived under a vow of silence that can be broken only once a year, on the first of August at 1 p.m., and only one person could speak something. One August 1st, the clock struck one as the nuns were eating lunch. The youngest nun said, "This vegetable soup is terrible." A year passed, and the clock struck one on August 1st as the nuns were eating the same vegetable soup. The oldest nun said, "I don't think it's so bad." The following year, as the clock struck one, the third nun said, "Would you two please stop bickering!?"

World Communion Sunday is an annual reminder that Christians are to stop bickering! This special celebration on the first Sunday in October is a creation of the Presbyterian Church, who sought a Sunday to mark the unity of the church and a hope for peace in the world in 1936. Designed to become an ecumenical occasion it was adopted by the National Council of Churches in 1940. We all know what happened in the world and to the church in the following 5 years. The most devastating war in human history in which millions died, the vast majority of them civilians. The God-inspired hopes within the church for unity and peace, are never to be wiped out, not even by such a war, and so 75 years on, the Church remains undaunted in pointing towards the vision and hope of worldwide communion, causing and marking an end to war and violence; poverty and prejudice; and see the life of faith, the life of the Church be expressed in a new depth and level of cooperation, participation and neighborliness with and to and for God and all of God's creation.

Today each of us can move toward the genuine and much-needed hopes of World Communion Sunday by applying the intent of today's Scripture readings to our lives as Christian people, giving special attention to the place and role of Jesus Christ, the suffering servant. Jesus is the One who bears the very identity and personality of the owner of the vineyard and who carries the just message and proper demands of the owner to the vineyard's current tenants and seeks from all of us a response.....

Today's, Jesus story, takes place in a vineyard, one of the most powerful, persuasive, enduring, biblical images for the Kingdom of God. Today's, Jesus story, is about the state of affairs in the commonwealth of God.

On the day Jesus is recorded as relating this story, in the Temple in Jerusalem , many diverse groups leaned forward to hear what Jesus was to say; trying to make sense of who this Jesus was, seeking wisdom as to what His message was and what His presence was to mean.

On this day, October 2, 2011 all around the world diverse groups, peoples, nations, tribes, individuals, likewise, lean forward to hear what Jesus is saying, what Jesus needs us to be and become. And everywhere this is happening a Table has been prepared, a meal has been set before us, a feast has been prepared, a tangible reminder of four different roles that we see play out in this story and in the life of our congregation today.

In today's, Jesus story and in sight and in light of the Communion Table set and prepared:

We see the role of God as provider.

We see how we usurp God's role

We see the role of Jesus as Mediator, Redeemer, Savior.

We see our role when given the opportunity to respond in a new and better way – what do you want to be ... when you grow up?

We see the role of God as provider. As ever Jesus works with material that is very familiar to those who are listening. All of them have experience of vineyards – in their family, among their friends, in their village. They all know of the many appearances of the vineyard in the Hebrew scriptures, a symbol for Israel – a symbol of Israel’s faithfulness when the vineyard is blooming and thriving and producing a great harvest; a symbol of Israel’s stubbornness and pride when the vineyard is unproductive, parched and desolate, which often results in a change of tenants.

The owner has much in which to rejoice and take justifiable pride, having chosen well and planted well, a good harvest results. A good, even great harvest results and the vineyard has been prepared for just such a harvest – that is why there is a fence around it and a watchtower to protect it and discourage scavengers; a wine press has already been installed a declaration of faith that the harvest would come in enough quantity and quality to make wine.

We see how we usurp God’s role. This is the catch, the tenants who have taken on the lease and worked the land and who owe the owner his share of the crop are so pleased with themselves; so happy at the result of their efforts; so impressed with the harvest they have helped bring about; so chuffed with success that they decide that they will keep to themselves the twelve or twenty or hundred cases of the new vintage that had been agreed as their rent... after all, they were the ones who did the work.

It is Jesus’ intention that His listeners see ourselves in the characters of the tenants. Just as we see in the person of the landowner something of the personality and character of God, so in the tenants we meet someone we also know very well, we meet ourselves, for we do think that we deserve to be at the center of God’s vineyard rather than be just a tenant.

We live in a wonderful world, not of our own creation; we have been well-provided for; we have a measure of protection and we are blessed, deeply blessed. Indeed those of us here in this beautiful Sanctuary, are among the most blessed of all the tenants who are provided for on God’s good earth. In the vineyard provided to us by God we have every reason to rejoice in God’s goodness and rejoice in the abundance of God’s provision even as we gladly share what God deserves of all the bounty that we are receiving. No other arrangement seems right or just or fair..... yet, yet we have our own ideas and before we know it we are convincing ourselves and anyone else who will listen that we are more deserving, much more deserving than the One who has made all of it possible.

Who is this owner anyway we opine, he seems remote, faraway, out of touch, surely he has other vineyards, he doesn’t really need our harvest, he likely will never come back here so what does it matter if we abuse and kill his messengers, and even this one who comes, whom some tell us is the owner’s very son, can we be sure, is it maybe a trick, could the owner already be dead?

The tenants in this parable make some very wrong choices – they are greedy and corrupt; and they perpetrate violence towards innocents, the slaves and the son of the owner, none of whom had ever done anything to harm the tenants except bear and carry the request of the owner.

In God’s commonwealth we are all share-croppers, but there is a problem –we are the problem – for we are greedy, we want a piece, a bigger piece of the action for ourselves, we refuse to settle for a share. Indeed what we really want is to have the whole enchilada and the endless taco and the grande burrito and the special quesadilla and the chimachanga all at the same time - thank you very much. As Freddie Mercury once put it: “I want it all, I want it all, I want it all, and I want it now.”

Jesus was very aware of the violence in the society of His day and the way violence was used against God's purposes – from Cain and Abel all the way down to the violence visited on John the Baptist as humans demonstrated again and again our long lasting affinity for violence against one another, and even against God. Even including that most remarkable day when we discovered that we had God in our grasp, we had God in custody and like the tenants in this Jesus' story, we nailed Him to a tree!

We see the role of Jesus as Mediator, Redeemer, Savior. Embedded centrally and deeply within this parable of rejection and deadly violence against the landowner's son is the reminder that the heart of faith is relationship with Jesus. The tenants did not seize and kill an idea, a principle, or a system of doctrine. They seized and killed the landowner's son. The gospel comes to us as a person.

The Son has to come in order that things be put right. Our faith affirms that despite the reality of our wrong choices and actions that God can, will and does transform violence into peace; hatred into love; death into life.

We see our role when given the opportunity to respond in a new and better way – what do you want to be ... when you grow up? In this story and here at this table God is setting out to convince us all over again of all that Jesus has already done and is doing for us and in response God is asking us, begging us to make new and different choices; God is inviting us to resolve to live in new ways; God is asking us to start over and begin anew as faithful tenants of the owner who will never let us go and who asks and expects us to do great and amazing things with the resources that the owner has put into our hands.

The message of this parable, the message of World Communion Sunday, the reminder that we need to receive this stewardship season is that ALL we have and are BELONGS and COMES from God, nothing that we are or have is ours. We are called to place our entire crop into God's hands, for it ALL belongs to God just as we BELONG to God entirely. Recognizing that all we have and are belong to God frees to get about using what we are receiving from God for all the tasks and work that God has for us – to care for our family, to care for God's church, to care for God's world, to care for all whom God loves.

It would be easy once again this year to look out at the troubled economy and decide that this is again a time when we need to keep a greater share of all that we receive from God for ourselves. But that would not be the most faithful response, given that ALL we have and are come from God; given the pressures that some members of our congregation are facing; given the growing needs in the community and world around us; and given our need to give so that the work of God can be developed and extended this is a year to connect to God's call by increasing the percentage of our income and means that we will commit to all God is asking and expecting of OAPC in the year and years ahead.

An out-of-towner drove his car into a ditch in a desolated area. Luckily, a local farmer came to help with his big strong horse named Buddy. He hitched Buddy up to the car and yelled, "Pull, Nellie, pull!" Buddy didn't move. Then the farmer hollered, "Pull, Buster, pull!" Buddy didn't respond. Once more the farmer commanded, "Pull, Coco, pull!" Nothing. Then the farmer nonchalantly said, "Pull, Buddy, pull!" And the horse easily dragged the car out of the ditch. The motorist was most appreciative and very curious. He asked the farmer why he called his horse by the wrong name three times. The farmer said, "Oh, Buddy is blind and if he thought he was the only one pulling, he wouldn't even try!"

Gathered around this Table, lovingly and graciously set; as we allow today's, Jesus' story, to echo in our hearts and minds; be sure that God is calling all of you, all of us forward by name into deeper commitment and greater generosity.

God is calling all of you, all of us; it is time to be listening; time to pay attention to God's call on our life; time to do everything that you can to unite your strength and effort and generosity with the whole church in order that together we harness and harvest all the gifts that God has for us and so help propel our church forward into a faithful future for surely this is who we want to be as we grow up, into Christ.
Amen.