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27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year A
University Presbyterian Church
Tuscaloosa, AL
5 October 2008

FLOUR/GRAPES
MATTHEW 21:33-46

Today is World Communion Sunday. Churches throughout the world will be celebrating the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Christians in Pakistan and Israel, Iran and Iraq, Russia and Georgia, Sudan and Darfur are gathering to remember and to proclaim that, in Jesus Christ, we are one body, the church.

In the PC(USA), the hymn "Christ Is Risen! Shout Hosanna" is being sung, as congregation after congregation gathers to break the bread of new creation from Alaska to Hawaii to Alabama. Please note that this hymn, written by Brian Wren, appears in the Easter section of the hymnal. Labeling it as such seems redundant given that every Sunday is Easter. Every Sunday is a celebration of the Easter story; every Sunday is the Lord's Day.

Here at UPC, every Sunday is communion Sunday, and every Sunday is World Communion Sunday, because every time that we gather at that table to break the bread of new creation and drink the wine of resurrection, we do so with all the saints who have come before us and will again with all the saints who come after us.

The bread itself is just bread. The wine is even less than that; it is merely grape juice. You know, because at least half of you bake the bread the night before or stop by the grocery store on the way to church every so often, because you have agreed to set the table for the congregation.

Sometimes the pastor complicates the process. Ask Rob Spencer. I contacted him somewhere around Wednesday to say what I am sure that he already knew: that this Sunday is World Communion

Sunday. Then I suggested that he bring breads from different parts of the world---like Jewish rye or Indian naan---to emphasize that this is, in fact, *World Communion Sunday*. Rob agreed, and his efforts are appreciated (as he brought Italian bread and Mediterranean flatbread to church with him today).

Any time that anybody agrees to work behind-the-scenes in a church, saying “yes” is potentially disenchanting. So is giving serious thought to what we do when we gather to worship if God did not exist or if Jesus Christ had not given us a reason to shout, “Hosanna!”

A story that belongs in this discussion was told to me by Paige Miller. She was quoting the 21st century Reformed theologian Kai. After church one Sunday, Kai confessed to his mom: “We say the blood of Christ, shed for you, but that is not blood; it is grape juice.” Now when I serve Kai, I say, “the cup of salvation.”

Kai has a point, one with which John Calvin, among many others, would agree. The Sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It *is* just grape juice. It does not make Jesus Jesus; God does. Bread does not make us one body; Christ does.

Bread-baking and grape-crushing are messy, as messy as the circumstances out of which God gathers us together. Ever made bread? I confess that I have not, but I have passed through kitchens where bread was being made, and flour was everywhere, even on me (and remember: I was only passing through). I had to change clothes. I remember saying to guests, “Pease wait. I have to go de-flour myself.”

Grape-crushing seems even messier; and while I have not experienced this process up close and personally, I remember vividly an episode of *I Love Lucy* in which Lucy and Ethel are stomping grapes inside the fence of a vineyard.

The stories behind the bread that we break and the grapes, whose juice that we drink, are gruesome. Bread is kneaded then stone-baked. Grapes are beaten and crushed just like the servants and the son in Jesus’ parable.

This parable is complex; and quite frankly, the first time that I re-read the story in preparation for this sermon, I did not have a warm and fuzzy feeling about the landowner. Notice what the landowner does: plants a vineyard; builds a fence; digs a wine press; erects a watchtower (of Babel?); leases it to tenants; and then announces, "I am out of here!" The only contact that the landowner has with the tenants after his (or her?) departure is to send people to collect the harvest.

The landowner abdicates all responsibility and suffers mightily, and the consequences of the landowner's complacency are dire. The slaves that are sent to collect proceeds are slaughtered. Scripture says that they are "beaten...stoned... and crushed." So what does the landowner do? Commission another set of servants to collect.

Apparently, the landowner is not much of a student of history or simply believes that it does not repeat itself. Why pursue a policy that has proven that it will fail? The landowner does, and when it fails a second time, there is a change of plan. The landowner sends a son.

Surely, the landowner understands by now that the consequences of this decision could be grave, and yet the son is sent anyway. Maybe the landowner thought the tenants did not respect the others who were sent, because they were slaves, and if the son were sent, the tenants would listen, and then having listened, obey. It does not work that way, and in the end, it is probably not too helpful to psychologize a parable within a story within a Gospel.

Remember this story belongs to Jesus, and he offers this story as an elucidation of Scripture. Jesus says to them (and the "them" here refers to chief priests and Pharisees), "Don't you read? Remember that part of the Hebrew canon that says, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.'" Amazing? Not if you are chief priest or Pharisee: as Jesus concludes, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom (and please note that despite being one in Christ, there

are competing definitions of “fruits” in churches throughout the world today). The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

Notice where Jesus plots himself in this parable: among servants and slaves. The son is next in this line of succession, and the landowner---the one with whom I experienced so much discomfort in the beginning of the story---appears to be God. Uh, oh...still, the relationship between the landowner and the son seems strained, even though it is the Son who is doing the storytelling. Maybe Jesus is being passive-aggressive; he is human after all. Maybe he is becoming clearer and clearer about how his life on earth will end (by being beaten, crushed and killed), and this story in another way of praying, “Please, please, dear God, let this cup pass from me!”

Clearly, Jesus is feeling pressure (and if Jesus feels pressure, what does that say about our chances of feeling stressed), and yet, he seems calmed and comforted by the hope of resurrection and the assurance that justice will be served. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; it will crush anyone on whom it falls.

To whom is Jesus referring: the ones who lean on him---his followers---those who worship him as the Christ or the chief priests and Pharisees who soon will be brought to justice? Maybe both...the chief priests and Pharisees are definitely the subject of his ire, but Jesus is increasingly aware of the cost of discipleship, both for himself and others. Soon and very soon, both he and his disciples will know more and more about being beaten, crucified and stoned.

Given the suffering and deaths that the faithful are about to endure, it is amazing to me that the chief priests and the Pharisees are the ones who respond to this parable with fear and trembling. Apparently, they are beginning to appreciate the difference between ecclesial and prophetic powers. You know, sometimes it is difficult to distinguish church authority from civil authority. To put it more crassly, sometimes it is difficult to differentiate church politics from old fashioned CNN/PBS/Fox News politics. Ecclesial authorities grip tightly what is already slipping through their fingers while prophets,

who often have nothing to lose, speak truth openly and are incredibly vulnerable, even to the point of death.

Do you think of yourself as being more political or prophetic? To what or whom have you given power over you? How difficult would it be to take back that power? How committed are you to doing so? Around what have you built fences? Take a look at the watchtowers that you have erected. Which ones are you willing to climb? For what are you willing to be beaten, crushed or stoned? Where will you find the clarity of vision and strength of purpose for the journey? At the cross...at the table...which point to grace and grace abundantly: Like flour and grapes, our bodies, our lives, point to a greater body, a greater life, the one from whom all blessings flow. To the God of all grace, who calls us to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen.