

† **RESPONSIVE READING FROM THE GOSPEL:** Matthew 21:33-46

World Communion Sunday

Rev. Tom Hagood

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Psalm 24 tells us quite plainly . . . “The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” That’s a bit counter to what our culture tells us. But the truth is . . . we might lay claim to all kinds of things in this world . . . the land our homes sit on . . . the stuff we keep in those homes . . . our cars . . . our iPhones and our laptops . . . but the truth is . . . nothing . . . absolutely nothing . . . truly belongs to us.

The earth is the Lord’s . . . and all that is in it . . . including those who live in it. God has first claim . . . we’re just caretakers . . . caretakers, you might say, of God’s vineyard of creation. And as God’s caretakers, we are called upon to produce the fruit of the vineyard. And . . . we are called to share that fruit . . . with the rest of God’s good creation . . . not to horde it . . . not to claim it as our own . . . and, most importantly . . . not to build walls around the vineyard. You see . . . this table . . . is the symbol of God’s vineyard . . . because here Jesus Christ invites everyone to share out of God’s blessings . . . God’s grace . . . God’s love . . . God’s abundance . . . And yet . . . I wonder . . . who is really welcome at this table?

Jesus is challenging us this morning . . . to consider who we reject in this world . . . who we keep from coming to this table . . . who we ignore . . . who we hate . . . who we detest . . . who frightens us . . . who angers us . . . Jesus is calling us to look deeply into our hearts this morning, this World Communion Sunday . . . and to consider . . . is there anyone you might not welcome at this table?

Let us read together our Gospel Lesson from the 21st chapter of Matthew as printed in the bulletin. Out of respect for the Word of the Lord, those who are able, please stand for the reading.

One: Jesus said, “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

Choir: “Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’

Congregation: “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance’” So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

One: "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "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."

Choir: Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?"

All: "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

One: When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

One: This is the word of our Lord.

People: Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Who is really welcome at this table? There are people here . . . today . . . in this sanctuary . . . who know what it is like to be rejected. There are some people in this room who have experienced rejection because of their Christian beliefs and the government in their homeland oppressed them . . . some of you know the stigma of what it is like to suffer rejection because of the color of your skin and as a matter of fact, you still face the ugly reality of racism that still exists in this country . . . some of you have less money and resources than others and you are sometimes rejected by those who have plenty. . . some of you may feel rejected because you have grown old . . . or you are too young . . . or maybe you don't dress the same way someone else dresses. . . or maybe you've been rejected because you have trouble learning a new language . . . there are so many ways we reject each other in this world . . . so many ways we build walls around our vineyards . . . so many ways we don't welcome people to this table.

You might not think you reject others . . . but the truth is . . . we all do . . . each and every one of us struggles with our fears . . . our prejudices . . . our hatred of people who have done us wrong. That's just the way we are. We might try and hide it . . . we might try to deny it . . . but deep in our hearts . . . the truth is there. But Jesus doesn't build walls. Instead . . . Jesus tears them down. That's precisely what he was doing when he told this parable to the Jewish religious leaders of his day. They had forgotten what God had called them to do . . . "To love the Lord with all of your heart, soul and might and to love your neighbor as yourself." Instead . . . they decided to make the rules . . . rules upon rules . . . rules that kept some people out of the temple . . . rules that meant the poor and the widow and the oppressed and the sick and the lame . . . were ignored and rejected. And Jesus wasn't going to let them get away with it. God's vineyard . . . God's good creation . . . God's love and grace . . . would not be contained behind walls . . . no . . . not

one bit.

God's grace would not be dammed up . . . Jesus Christ let those leaders know in no uncertain terms . . . that God's grace was meant to be released into all the world . . . all of the world for all of God's children . . . there would be no walls around God's vineyard . . . no one would be excluded.

Some people in this world have used this passage to condemn the Jewish people . . . because Jesus is announcing that he will be killed by those who claim control of the vineyard . . . and as the son of the owner of the vineyard . . . he will be sacrificed. But there is absolutely no truth in that condemnation. The fact is . . . the religious leaders of his time were plotting his death . . . they did reject many whom they should have been serving . . . but we are no better . . . just look around the world . . . just look around our own country . . . in our own community . . . we, too, need to hear those words again and again and again. Because as long as we judge anyone as less than we are . . . as long as we look down on someone and reject them because of their social status . . . their sexual identity . . . their race . . . their culture . . . their personal beliefs . . . their political views . . . for whatever reason . . . than we are no better than the Pharisees who heard Jesus' very words.

So who is really welcome at this table? On this World Communion Sunday . . . who is really welcome at this table? The truth is . . . there is some very good news in all of this . . . Jesus did not tell us this parable to condemn us . . . Jesus didn't use this parable as a death sentence to all of us wretched tenants. Because Christ knows us . . . he knows how we struggle to love God and to love our neighbors . . . he knows too well that we live in a world of sin. Why do you think God sent Jesus Christ into this world . . . not to condemn the us but to save us. No doubt about it . . . these are hard words . . . they are meant to be. They are meant to make us stop and look deeply into our hearts and see the truth. They are meant to make us think . . . to make us see who it is in this world that we reject . . . and then to rely on the grace of Jesus Christ to change that rejection into acceptance . . . and to welcome everyone to this table . . . no matter what our fears or hurts or hatred might be doing to prevent that. We don't have the power to do that . . . there aren't enough rules in the world to make it work . . . but God's grace through the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ can do what we ourselves cannot do.

That is why Christ keeps right on coming back into our lives . . . over and over . . . even when we have a hard time accepting someone at this table . . . Christ does not . . . And Christ will keep right on working in us through the power of the Holy Spirit . . . to one day open this table up to all of God's children . . . and on that day . . . it will truly be World Communion . . . as we all gather at the banquet table . . . side by side . . . White and Black . . . Asian and American . . . Red and Yellow . . . Gay and Straight . . . Republican and Democrat . . . Tech Fans and Dog Fans . . . all of God's children . . . as the walls keep coming tumbling down.

Where tyrants' hold is tightened . . . where strong devour the weak.
Where innocents are frightened, the righteous fear to speak.
There let Your church awaking, attack the powers of sin,
And, all their ramparts breaking, with you the victory win.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.