

“A Peace That Connects”  
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20  
Matthew 21:33-46

You would think that God would have given up on letting God’s people tend gardens after what happened in the Garden of Eden. The perfect place: free of suffering, where Adam and Eve would have all they needed-- and yet, they wanted more, and through the bite of the forbidden fruit, found their exit into a world that would offer so much more: suffering, work, desire, childbirth, death, and knowledge between good and evil.

Then in Jesus’ parable, we meet a landowner. With great care-- some may even say, love-- this landowner builds another kind of garden-- a vineyard. He plants it himself. He digs the winepress for all those grapes that will be harvested. He carefully places a fence to border the vineyard, and a watchtower, to protect the vineyard from whatever dangers lie outside.

As it turns out, in this case the dangers aren’t on the outside. They are on the inside. For when the landowner leaves for another country, the tenants he selected to harvest the fruit beat, stoned, and murdered each servant the landowner sends to collect the fruits.

Clearly they had not heard about the Ten Commandments, or if they had, they shrugged and said, “I don’t care.” These statements shared from God, to Moses, to the people, to us, point to something both universal and specific: so universal, that our many traditions from the global church proclaim them in each of their tongues, and our Jewish siblings in faith proclaim them too. And not only that: most of the statements point to things that are essential to the ordering of human life in any culture or religion. But there are specific things too, that reveal God’s love language: I want a day that you spend time with me, and I can spend time with you, and we will rest together. Do not get fancy worshipping me; let’s just keep things simple, without the idols, and intimate-- we don’t need to have the other gods there too.

The Ten Commandments are like a fence and a watchtower that create the borders and protection needed so that fruit can grow. If you follow these commandments, you will surely harvest good fruits in your life. But what then will you do with these fruits?

We learn from the gospel that the fruits are meant to be returned-- at least some of them-- to the one who planted the vineyard in the first place. But the tenants have decided that all within the fence is theirs, and they will do with it as they please. We do not know the quality of their fruit, just that they mean to keep it for themselves-- or maybe, they never harvested anything at all to begin with. The violence they hurl upon the servants of the landowner breaks numerous commandments at once. By any earthly laws, and even religious ones, they would be thrown out, jailed, and maybe even executed.

And yet, for some strange reason, the landowner keeps trying with them, sending out another batch of servants. When these servants are killed too, the landowner sends his own son.

If this parable is about God's love for God's people, it sounds like God is a fool. Also, being a servant of the Lord is not sounding like such a great gig, according to this parable. And his own son! Really! Were all these lives lost really worth some barrels of wine?

Dr. Kenneth Bailey, who was a biblical scholar who taught in the Middle East as well as in the USA, tells a story to parallel Jesus' story. The story is factual.

When King Hussein of Jordan was told that a group of young officers were at that moment meeting in the barracks to put final touches on a coup and asked should they all be arrested and/or killed, his response was to order a small helicopter, fly to the roof of the barracks, tell the pilot to leave immediately if he heard gunfire, and then to go down the stairs and walk into the room where the officers were gathered. He told them that if they did what they were planning, there would be civil war, chaos, and that hundreds maybe thousands would be killed. Rather than risk that, he suggested that they shoot him now. That way only one person would die. The officers all knelt, kissed his robe, and re-swore loyalty to him.

This story points to the nearness Jesus tells us that God risks offering to **us**. Even when we have broken or ignored the commandments. Even when we have not listened to the prophets. Even when we cast Jesus aside like a mask we don't feel like wearing.

"The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone."

And yes-- the fruits of the vineyard are worth cultivating and sharing. There is something to this wine or juice which we have used to set our tables today that is so very powerful that Jesus poured his life into it, and then lives on when it is poured into us.

So as we prepare to share this meal together, consider what fruit is in your vineyard that God has asked you to cultivate and share. What is the condition of your fence and watchtower? And as we are literally fenced in by our own measures for safety: social distancing, masks, spending more time at home-- how are we cultivating the fruit that God has sown there? How are we prepared to share it beyond those borders?

I want to share with you now two testimonies from the global church, so we can see how fruit is being harvested in these places. In a few minutes we will share in a Statement of Faith from the Presbyterian Church in South Africa. But first, we will watch a testimony from Malawi, to share of what the church is doing there. The witness of the Malawian people is a harvest of joy, even with the challenges of scarcity. As Presbyterian mission co-worker Rev. Cheryl Barnes says, "It is not that Malawians are satisfied to live without basic necessities; it is more that they refuse to

let scarcity impact their view of themselves and of others.” Let’s now witness on video the fruitfulness of God’s people there. (video: <https://vimeo.com/450955030>)