

One Table  
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr  
The First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – October 4, 2020

Please Read:  
Isaiah 5:1-7  
Matthew 21:33-46

I've had the privilege to live in different countries and worship with Christians from around the world, so World Communion Sunday is near and dear to my heart. I remember my first experience of worshipping with Christians in a different culture as an international exchange student in the Peoples Republic of China in 1982. It started in a classroom where I was giving a talk on US history and made reference to Max Weber's book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. A hand shot up and one of the students asked me if I was a Christian. I said yes, and the whole class burst into nervous laughter. I asked why they were laughing, and some of the students joked, "you don't believe in an old man with a long beard sitting in a throne up in the sky do you?" and I said, "of course not." I said being a Christian was more about following the teachings of Jesus. And I could see the Communist Party class monitor getting visibly concerned where this conversation was going, so I said quickly, "Let's get on with the history lesson. We'll talk later."

After class, after all of the other students and class monitor left, a few students came up to me and asked shyly, "Are you really a Christian?" I said, yes, I think so! To which they eagerly responded, "So are we! Would you like to come to church with us?" And for the first time in my life, I was introduced to what I later learned was the "underground church" in China. I learned that we could not talk about faith on campus but had to go to the public parks to talk about spiritual things. I realized these students risked everything for their faith. And I had to realize I had never risked anything... I'll never forget as I was leaving China, one of my teachers looked at me as we were saying goodbye, and said, "Scott, always remember that you can leave, but we cannot."

Now while things may have changed for the better in the PRC, many Christians around the world continue to suffer for their faith. I have worshipped with believers in Arab countries, in African countries, in Muslim countries, in Russia and throughout Central America. Some of you have heard me say that at the American Church in Paris, we would have somewhere between 40-50 different nationalities any given Sunday in worship. The Body of Christ, the Holy catholic Church, the universal communion of saints is what Margaret Meade once said was "*a sociological impossibility*." We simply don't belong together. So, the question is, what keeps us together?

Our two lectionary texts for today may seem unlikely texts for World Communion Sunday, but in fact I believe the violence of these texts gives us a clue to why we are here today, and why we must always remember that we are part of a World Community of believers in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The simple fact of the matter is that we all have experienced suffering in life, and have embraced the paradox that we worship a God who is able to bring new life, even out of the worst kind of violence and corruption, by choosing not the way of violence, but of forgiveness and self-giving love.

The gospel text for today is what is called a *midrash*. It's Jesus doing an interpretation of the much older text from Isaiah that would have been well known to his listeners. This intricate poem of Isaiah chapter 5 expresses the divine pain at the people's failure to live out their relationship with God.

The failure to produce justice and righteousness breaks God's heart. The vineyard's failure to produce better fruit forced the owner to remove his attentiveness. In Jesus' parable, however, the "produce" was fine, but the delivery system was malfunctioning. The problem was *not* with the vineyard's production but with the tenants themselves. These were extremely violent tenant farmers, harming and slaughtering the various groups of slaves sent by the landowner. The rationale for their brutality and murderous ways was stated explicitly when the son visited: "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance" (21:38).

On the surface, the landowner's decision to send his son in light of the tragedy of his servants seemed unwise. But Jesus' parable is not the parable of the foolish landowner. Rather, in an "honor and shame" culture, the landowner's decision to send his son as emissary was appropriate since he would expect proper respect for his appointed heir.

In fact, the term "Landowner" here may be translated, preferably, as "household master" (from *oikodespotes*) and was a common analogy for God in Jesus' teaching in the gospel according to Matthew. In other words, the term is not just about who owns the land, but who is running the household or the family. Jesus, you see, empathizes with those who are marginalized from the household of God. He identifies with those who have experienced alienation and violation because of their lack of status in the larger society. And he writes himself into the story because he is the son who will be killed so that all who simply trust in him will receive their inheritance as the beloved children of God.

In Jesus' Kingdom, *all* are welcome into the household of God. Justice will prevail. I wonder if for Matthew the produce that needs better distribution in God's vineyard is outlined in chapter 25: food to eat, water to drink, welcome for the stranger, clothes for the naked, care for the sick, compassion for the imprisoned?

What we often forget is that up until the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, the Christian church was an underground movement. We were a minority community that was persecuted and oppressed by the dominant Roman culture that used force to keep people in line, the infamous *Pax Romana*... Something shifted when Christianity became the religion of the Empire. We started to go soft on issues of greed, powerlessness, nonviolence, non-control, and simplicity. We started to get embarrassed about teaching God's way of mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation, that God's justice is restorative and not retributive. We started to forget that suffering, self-giving love is at the very heart of the Christian good news.

Note here that it is Jesus' listeners who suggest that the Landowner, God, will issue violent revenge. Of course, that's what we would say... But that is not the way of the God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, in Jesus, we see a significant *change* in what we view as "justice." It is called "*mercy*." It's called "forgiveness." Jesus's response to violence is to turn the other cheek, and he calls us to follow him. Yes, we may be crushed by this way of self-giving love, but only through *this* way do we open ourselves and the world to something more beautiful than simple quid pro quo and retributive justice.

Some of you may be familiar with the Japanese artform of Kitsugi, translated as “golden joinery.” It is an ancient art from that has its philosophical roots in embracing the flawed or imperfect. The artist repairs broken pottery by mending the cracks with lacquer mixed with gold. Makoto Fujimoro, a Japanese Christian artist is publishing a book (*Art + Faith: A Theology of Making*, Yale University is publishing it) and he has a chapter in his book on Kitsugi. He is starting Kitsugi groups where people work together to repair broken pottery with this ancient technique and share over time the brokenness and wounds of their own lives.

Suffering, I believe, is at the heart of Christian community. We are called to share in Christ’s suffering as we become vulnerable and share our own brokenness and wounds with others, and as we empathize and work to relieve the suffering of others in our world.

So, it’s not Kitsugi, but I love this bowl and invite you to come after the service to look at it more closely. There’s a story behind this bowl, but initially some artist friends, LC and Tommy Tobey, visited our church in Paris and were so overcome with the diversity they wanted to offer a gift. We talked about a baptismal font that symbolized how each of us, so unique and differently shaped, broken in our own way, are welcomed into the household of God and God forms and reforms us into a new creation, a beautiful new community...

The technique is simple: they took differently colored broken shards of glass and placed them over a clear glass mold, and fired it until they were melded together into this beautiful piece of art. I believe this is a beautiful symbol of the church, even the church universal, taking different people with our sharp edges and misshapen lives, and forms us together into beautiful art for all the world to see... This bowl is a copy of the original in Paris, and I want to share it with you because while we might think of these separate shards of glass as each of us here making up our congregation, we may also think of each shard as the many congregations around the world who make up the Body of Christ in the world...

But here’s the thing: That is a finished piece of art, but the church is still in the making! You see, I want Jesus, the cornerstone who was rejected, to fall on me, to crush me, so that he can reshape me into something beautiful with all of you. I want Jesus to take my hatred and turn it into love, my despair into hope, my fear into faith, my death into life, my judgment into grace, and my suffering into a means of transforming me more into the beloved child God sees and calls me to be.

So, finally as we gather to receive from this table today, we celebrate how God’s grace, through the church, is extended “to people of all ages, nations and races.” As we share in this Lord’s Supper, we show our solidarity with our suffering siblings in Christ around the world. But we also are making a commitment to the Way of Jesus, which is nothing more, and nothing less than self-giving love. Mother Theresa once was asked how to love. She said simply, love until it hurts.

As the broken bread and cup that is poured out remind us that God takes even the brokenness of our lives and world, and makes something beautiful and new, may we follow the way of Jesus, workers in God’s vineyard who are willing to be broken and poured out for others. And may we, as different as we all are, celebrate that we are of one church, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one hope, all gathered today around.... *one table*.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*