

## **The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – May 2, 2021 – Fruit of the Vine Psalm 22:25-31 and John 15:1-8**

For decades, Christians have been watching worship services on television from the comfort of their homes. This has been particularly helpful for those with mobility issues, and for others who could not easily connect with a faith community in-person. Still, until March of 2020, few of us could have imagined a time when worshipping from home would become the norm. It took the arrival of a pandemic to bring rapid change. And, in an effort to meet the challenges of this moment, the church grew. We adapted. We carried on.

After six months of physical separation, I wondered if a new paradigm might be emerging. If, despite the many complications of worshipping remotely, some believers would forsake the existing model of in-person fellowship in favor of something radically different. I wondered if Christians might begin forming faith communities that were 100% online. Truly global congregations with no facilities or in-person gatherings in which the entire ministry would occur via social media, and livestreaming, and chat rooms. Might this be the way of the future?

Then, six months became a year of social distancing and isolation. And, after everything that we had endured, it was abundantly clear that this grand experiment

had taken a devastating toll. Predictably, we experienced our second COVID Easter not only feeling disconnected from the Christian fellowship, but also feeling battered and shaken by the whole experience. In recent months, I have been in conversation with several members of our community who maintain that nothing over the course of this past year has been more painful for them than the inability to physically worship at Westminster with their friends.

As I consider the profound sense of grief and loss that many are now carrying, I am exceedingly grateful that there is light at the end of the tunnel, and that we will soon enjoy glad reunion in this place. In this community where know one another personally and engage in inter-generational dialogue. In this fellowship where we work side-by-side on meaningful projects, and nurture infants from baptism, and affirm youth in confirmation, and receive the sacrament of Holy Communion.

The local congregation is where we are fed by the Word of God, where many walk down the aisle for the first time as husband and wife, and where we pay our final respects to the saints of our faith. In each of these ways, we are reminded of the significance of physical presence. Of the profoundly relational nature of ministry. And the reality that, at its best, the church is always striving to bear witness to the fruit of the vine of which Jesus speaks in our second lesson this morning.

As this pandemic has taught us, when our relationships suffer, we suffer. And so, while we have adopted a number of positive practices, such as video conferencing and online streaming, there can be no substitute for physical connection. Or, as one clergy friend recently quipped, “my new idea of hell is being a pastor during a pandemic with no end.”

The relationships that we value do not just happen. They must be cultivated and nurtured. This is why Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” Here we find a powerful parallel for the present moment. For just as the church suffers when its members are scattered and disconnected, the same is true of our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Any who have attempted to isolate themselves from the fellowship and guidance of God soon learn that they are withering, spiritually. And that, if this continues for any length of time, it appears as though their gifts are simply dying on the vine. We all know people like this. Individuals whose lives once seemed so promising until they began to distance themselves, one-by-one, from the positive influences around them until the only affirming voices in their lives were cheering them on for all of the wrong reasons.

These things don't typically happen overnight, but gradually and incrementally. Which is the same way, mind you, that we are nurtured in the faith. No matter our age, the ones we choose to surround ourselves with are critically important to our continued development. For it is often in community that our guiding principles are nurtured and affirmed.

The beauty of the church is found in the call to rise up. To get involved. To engage. To be a force for good in the world. When Jesus commissioned the disciples "go and make disciples," this was not a passive command. He did not tell his followers to "wait and welcome converts."

No. He told us to go. To be in motion. To teach, and to lead, and to serve. He gave us the law of love and the gift of community and sent us out into the world. And as our understanding of what it means to love our neighbor expands, we find ourselves welcoming more and more people into that circle of trust. And we find ourselves working in joyful partnership, and pursuing shared goals, in order that more people might rise up. This is the life we have in Christ.

Back in the 1990s, Westminster endured a painful schism. Hundreds of members of this congregation left with the pastor who was serving at that time. Many

of those individuals founded a new fellowship, which became known as the New Covenant Community Church. A Presbyterian minister named Tom Ulrich now serves as the pastor there. Over the past several years, Tom and I have become friends. And, last summer, he watched with interest as Westminster directly addressed that difficult moment in our past. We did so by commissioning portraits of several previous pastors, including the one who led the charge for schism.

In light of that event, Tom expressed his appreciation for our efforts at reconciliation and said, “Jon, I think that it might be really beneficial if, when we are back worshipping in-person, we might have a joint prayer service of some kind. We could meet at our respective peace poles, located on the grounds of each of our churches, and we could pray together there. What do you think about that?” To me, this suggestion sounds like the fruit of the vine. Like the work of the Great Physician who moves to heal not only the pains of pandemic separation, but the grief of entire communities separated by schism. For these are the places to which Christ calls us.

In our presbytery, a number of exciting things are now underway. Ministers and lay leaders in the greater Akron region are meeting regularly to share common challenges along with ways in which we might work together more effectively. From

this has already emerged a joint confirmation class in which five students from the United Presbyterian Church of Cuyahoga Falls joined our five students in the confirmation process. Now congregations throughout our region are discussing the many opportunities for future partnership. Friends, the fruit of the vine is emerging – even in pandemic. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.