

WHOSE LOVE IS IT ANYWAY?

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson
(Excerpts from a message preached by the Rev. Karen Burtner Graham
at the East Ohio Annual Conference on Wednesday, June 12)

Matthew 21:33-43
John 15:1-5, 9-12

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In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus shares with us a story about a landowner with tenants who lived on the land and who also worked his vineyard. However, upon the landowner's absence, the tenants decide to ignore their tenant lease agreement and assume ownership rights of the vineyard and its harvest. So when the time comes for the rightful owner to share in the harvest, the tenants refuse to give the owner what is due. They lash out in anger, beating one servant, stoning one, killing another, and then eventually killing the owner's son. The story describes those tenants as "wicked and deserving death." (Mt 21:41) Of course, the uncomfortable truth is that those tenants might just be us, because we like them have a tendency to assume proprietary rights over that which we do not own. This sense of false ownership gets in the way of being who God created us to be and bearing fruit worthy of Christ.

As we consider this parable in connection with the important goal of bearing fruit, I have some questions for you. First of all, whose vineyard is it anyway? It's God's vineyard. Whose vine is it? The vine is Jesus Christ. We, the faithful, Christ's followers are the fruit-bearing branches. As branches we live on the vine, but we do not create the vine. As branches we are connected to one another through the vine. A vine with only one branch cannot produce much fruit. The more branches the more fruit, the more fruit the more we have to share with the world. Without the vine and without other branches, fruit production is either non-existent or minimal at best.

It is so easy for thoughts of ownership to slip into our minds. Whenever we start thinking of the vine as mine, that's when we have the tendency to question and doubt the faithfulness of other people and other churches, you know, like those Presbyterians and Baptists who do things differently and who even believe differently. Claiming the vine of Christ all to ourselves is dangerous because the vine is never mine or yours or ours, the vine belongs to God.

So what about our United Methodist branch? Whose church is the UM church anyways? It is Christ's church, and right now it is clearly Christ's hurting and troubled church. Many of us are muddling through these troubled times the best we can. I am an ordinary pastor trying to be faithful. I know where I stand, where I fit when it comes to our troubled church. Does that mean that those who stand in a different place than I are wrong? It is not for me to pronounce that judgment. But what I do believe is that the church united or divided is the church of Jesus Christ before, while and after it is my church, your church, our church.

Of course, this thought about ownership is threatening for many reasons, both rational and irrational, but perhaps mostly because being the United Methodist church matters to most of us, we care. This is the church in which I was confirmed in Christ. It is the church in which Christ called me into ministry, and pastoral ministry has provided for my livelihood as well as blessed me in so many ways since my first appointment 33 years ago. It may feel very threatening to think of what might happen if we let go of our proprietary claims on this church we love so much – I'm right there with you. Moving into the unknown is very disconcerting. Our United Methodist way of being the church may or may not die. Our configuration may or may not be what it has

been. There may be heart-wrenching good-byes at some point; we don't know. But we do know what we have always known, the church belongs to Jesus Christ.

I find it helpful to rely on my personal experience in ministry in answering whose church is this anyway. I have been appointed 5 times to six congregations (my first appointment being a two-point charge). Those appointments have been in a variety of cultural and theological settings, and I experienced each setting as both challenging and rewarding. I have not always seen eye-to-eye with some of those I was appointed to pastor, and yet I grew very fond of each church I served and the people who made up that church. I loved them, and without exception I cried when the time came to leave them. No congregation was mine when I arrived, it's not mine while I'm there, or when I leave. I am here to lead, but not control, to council but not dictate, to challenge but not to threaten, to teach but not to indoctrinate. The job of the pastor is to serve, to teach, to enable, to administer the sacraments and life of the church, and to make room for God to create, for Jesus to save, and for the Spirit to transform.

Because many of you as lay people have a much longer history with this church perhaps that means you are the owners of this church. Is it more your church than my church, than Christ's church? When claims of ownership start coming up, it makes for a troubled church. Whenever people begin to act as owners, ministry is curtailed and power plays become more important than the power of prayer, than the power of the Holy Spirit, than the power of love. This tendency to claim ownership of what is not ours is insidious, but clergy do it and lay people do it. If we can have a less proprietary view of our local church than maybe that can influence how we also view the larger church. For clearly, we all reside on the vine together. If it is not my congregation, my denomination then perhaps we can be more open to the future God has in store for us.

Just as we can be proprietary over our church, faith, denomination, so we can be proprietary over our own lives. So, whose life is it anyway? Is it mine to do with as I see fit. Or is my life a gift from God to be cared for, nourished, tilled, and pruned for sure, but also to be shared generously with others. I think we know whose life it is, but are we living the answer?

Whenever I think of my life as only my life, I always lose perspective. The delusion of ownership causes anger and resentment to set in. I become less generous. I become more territorial, envious and judgmental. When I believe I am the owner of my life, I am more protective than compassionate. I'm pretty sure this is not just my experience. We must give up the illusion that we have control over the Vine, over the church, and over our lives. Otherwise, we will think it is okay to only be committed to those things and people we like. I have my list, you have yours. It's not easy getting over ourselves. But how else will we stay connected to the Vine and produce a plentiful harvest of fruit?

The Vine is so much larger than we can imagine, and branches connected to the Vine are full and healthy, producing plentiful, delicious fruit. The fruit is what? Love! Jesus said, "If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love..." (John 15:10) So, whose love is it anyway? It's Christ's love! God's love made known through Jesus Christ is not ours to possession and define. After all, our human love has a tendency to be stingy. We put conditions on our love. None of us loves perfectly. We have all been hurt by someone else's imperfect love, and we have hurt some else with our imperfect love. That is our reality.

But Jesus did not say to abide in our own sometimes good and sometimes messed up love. Jesus did not say, this is my commandment that you love one another as best you can, when you feel like it and when it doesn't cause you too much trouble. He did not say love one another half-heartedly, conditionally, on your own terms, and

only if you get something out of it or if the other deserves it and agrees with you. That's not what Jesus says, and yet it's often what we do.

This has been a year of troubles for our United Methodist Church - much fear and even anger has been expressed. Whose love can bring us through it? Whose love can take all the troubles and conflict, fightings around us and fears within us and transform it, moving us forward - only Christ's love. So let us believe in the power of Christ's love above all else, and let us trust in Christ more than we trust ourselves. Amen.