

**Popping Balloons  
(Luke 12:49-56)**

8-14-22  
Rev. J Koyama

**The “Vineyard”**

In the first reading this morning God builds a vineyard and supplies it with all that is necessary to make it bear good fruit. But almost inexplicably, things go bad. The vineyard produces sour grapes and the whole enterprise fails. The “grapes” in the story are God’s people and despite being teed up for success the grapes, whom God hoped to cultivate into something sweet and delightful, have gone sour.

***This reading applies to any number of situations today***, where people find themselves surrounded by everything they need in order to live fruitful lives. Think of our nation and the abundance of resources at our disposal; the amount of land, the fertile soil, the variety of people - an amazing human resource. Anyone looking from the outside would think that we should be the happiest people on earth – the sweetest cluster on the whole vine. And yet our nation is becoming God’s sour harvest, because people everywhere are drinking the poison of resentment and division over the management of the vineyard (which is also their responsibility).

***And we can take this story and what is happening in our society as a caution against letting the same thing happen to us.*** Because we too

are surrounded by very adequate resources. We have everything we need to generate a sweet harvest for the Master of the vineyard.

We have a wonderful congregation. The officers are very dedicated, caring and talented. Our gatherings have a “cheerful optimism” that I find attractive and uplifting. And there are plenty of relevant issues to choose from, by which we can connect with our larger community.

But it is also true that there are moments, mostly when we talk about the budget or our long term prospects, when an ominous cloud seems to hang over us and the mood grows testy and serious.

### **The Question**

So what is it that makes the difference between a people who turn out to be a harvest of sour grapes and a people that turn out to be the kind of sweet harvest that God seeks to produce? It may be that our Gospel reading can provide a piece of the answer.

### **The Gospel Reading: Prince of Peace?**

The Gospel reading this morning is surprising! It shows us a side of Jesus in which he seems to say the opposite of what we would expect him to say. The Jesus we know is the “Prince of Peace”, the one in whose Spirit, we are made one with God and with each other. It is

Jesus, who set the example for us, by refusing to resort to violence to accomplish God's purpose, and choosing instead to take up his cross.

And so, it is surprising to hear him describe himself with these words:

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother.

It sounds like mayhem (pause). However, I think one key to understanding these words lies in remembering that none of what he says here negates what he has said in other places. He is still the Prince of Peace and reconciler of the world.

So, in my opinion, it would be better to think of what he is describing here, not as his final goal, but as a necessary fire through which we have to pass in order that a more perfect peace can be forged. And the powerful language he is using is for emphasis. Because the point he is making is important.

Jesus doesn't want us to end up as a bunch of quarreling sour grapes any more than God does. But neither does he want us to live in a peace that is only surface deep. And so it must be that the fire of division

Jesus wants to kindle, is in the interest of a deeper and more satisfying peace.

And I think that **the source of the division** that Jesus wants to bring about is our willingness to speak the truth out loud. Or at least the truth as each one of us sees it. “You know”, he tells us, “what rain clouds look like and when it’s going to rain and when the south wind signals the coming of scorching heat. And, you know how to interpret the present time.” In other words he is encouraging us to call it as we see it – not as other people see it, not the way the talking heads on TV see it, but as we see the situation, as I see the situation - first hand.

You would think that calling it like you see it would not be that divisive. But in a highly judgemental tinderbox of a society like ours, it can make and lose us a lot of friends, including family members. So it is tempting, for harmony’s sake, to play it safe and keep a lid on our personal assessments. But I think Jesus would say that, as contradictory as it seems, there are times when, being willing to go through the fire of conflict, even if it creates division, is a necessary step on the way to becoming the sweet yield God desires.

### **Three Family Styles**

Imagine that there are three kinds of family. There are the families who fight all the time. Whenever anyone doesn't like something or feels irritated there is a big fight about it and nobody gives an inch, because no one is willing to back down. The arguments grow more heated and the exaggerations and accusations get more far-fetched and cruel. It's like seeing a car accident in slow-motion. And the result is a poisonous resentment that embitters the whole family, robbing it of all sweetness.

And on the opposite end, there are families who live under a gloomy silence. They push their discontent under the surface, in order to keep the fiction that all is well, when it isn't. I'm no psychologist, but it seems to me that this kind of silence usually exists because someone or ones who have the power to blow everything up, will fly off the handle if something is said that they don't want to hear. And so, in order to keep what unity there is, the rest of the family keep their true feelings to themselves or share them with their allies in whispers. And even though this leads to a kind of surface peace, they feel trapped and alone and unfulfilled as a family. And over time this too drains the sweetness from their lives.

And then there is a third kind of family in which conflict breaks into the open from time to time. True feelings or controversial views burst forth that can be hurtful and divisive. But rather than resulting in a negative outcome, the conflict ends up being a step in a positive direction.

And my feeling is that the difference between these families and families that go sour and get scrapped, is that they feel a certain freedom to speak the truth they feel without fear and are able to experience outbursts and divisions as a gift. They see conflict as being like the pin that pops the balloon, exploding misconceptions and revealing, in the aftermath, a clearer understanding of where everybody really stands. "Thank you, Jesus!"

It's easy to see how hard it is to think of conflict in this way. Because the "bang" created by an argument is a frightening thing. It reminds me of when I was a kid and was scared of balloons. The bang was way louder in my imagination than it was in reality. And I dreaded those games at birthday parties where everyone sits on their balloon and tries to make it pop. So whenever balloons appeared, I went into my "oh-oh" mode.

But at some point, I began to realize that the big “bang” was really more of a manageable “pop.” And I think this can be true of most conflict and division. That, if cool heads can prevail, the explosion is usually not as frightening as imagined, and the more accurate picture of where everyone stands that then follows, can be seen as a blessing. Families that have the courage to experience conflict in this way can, I think, go a long way to bringing a greater sweetness into the lives of their members – their “cluster.”

And if the division that is created reveals some irreconcilable difference that make it impossible to stay in relationship, a split can be a relief to all. I think there are many churches which are better off for having gone through a break up earlier in their existence.

Still, I think that the way this story encourages us to think of ourselves as grapes in a cluster, connected and fed through cords that represent our covenantal commitment to each other – all this suggests that ongoing relationships rather than break ups are preferable and that much sweetness is lost before it can again be restored.

I think our overall tendency is to see conflict and division as purely negative; but this morning gospel prompts us to consider ways in which

conflict can ultimately be seen as a gift from God. I think that is a good thing to keep in mind as we make our way together through the tenses moments in our life together and through this incredibly divisive time in our nation's history.