



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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July 27, 2014

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 13:24-52

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

“Scrumptious Double Chocolate Mousse Cake with Whipped Cream”

or

“May I Please Be Excused?”

When I was a little girl we always asked the question, “may I please be excused?” when we had finished our meal and wanted to be given permission to leave the table. I am not sure that children ask that question anymore and I am pretty sure that we don't ask that question in the church. Instead, we often just jump up from the table and leave.

Permission to leave the table was not always granted in our household. Sometimes my plate was not cleaned of peas or carrots or heaven forbid, liver, or I couldn't leave because my parents wanted me to stay around and help clean up. But sometimes they wanted me to stay because there was an irresistible dessert yet to come.

We have an irresistible dessert yet to come in the church. It is worth staying at the table to receive and even worth eating those things that we might not like, such as beets and cauliflower. Jesus spoke in parables. The Kingdom of God is like a pearl of great price or like yeast for leaven, or a mustard seed that grows into a great bush for birds to nest, but Rev. Robbin's parable is this: the kingdom of heaven is like an irresistible dessert – a scrumptious double chocolate mousse cake with oreo crust and whipped cream topping – with which both children and adults managed to eat everything disgusting on their plates to have. But they had to stay at the table in order to receive it.

That isn't always easy to do. Sometimes we feel like a lone stalk of wheat in a field of weeds with opinions that are not shared by the rest of the church. Last Sunday Della McPherson, our delegate to General Assembly gave us the highlights of her week in Detroit. Some of us heard her words as a welcome response to God's call to justice for all people. Others could not have cared less and don't see why the church should be involved in issues so “political” and yet others reacted with feelings of anger or perplexity.

In the Presbyterian Church we elect representatives at every level whom we entrust, not to represent the popular opinion, but rather to listen to God. This is true of our session members, our Presbytery council members, those sent to Synod from Presbytery and particularly those whom our Presbytery sends as delegates to General Assembly. We trust that as Della did, they will take the time to become informed on the issues before the particular committee to which they have been assigned. We trust that they will study the issues and more importantly, pray about the issues that come before them. We trust that in the end they will act by discerning not their own will, but the will of God for the church. We may not always agree with the word they have discerned and in time we all may find that we misunderstood God in our discerning process.

The church is never entirely pure, no matter how much we wish it were or how much we try to make it be so. It is, rather, a very mixed body of people with very different ideas about how to live into Jesus' teachings and his commandment to love one another. We have very different ideas about how to present the face of Jesus to the world. Likewise, not many of the decisions the church must make are ever wholly good or wholly evil. Most have elements of both good and evil and most are difficult to decide.

We wrestle with our issues today just as the church has wrestled with issues in the past – issues such as whether or not salvation is based on works or faith, whether we should baptize infants or only adults, whether the earth is the center of the universe rather than the sun, whether to abolish slavery or not, the place of women in the church, just to mention a few. In the early years of the 20th century one of the issues dividing the Presbyterian Church was the question of whether to have paraments such as the ones we have today on the communion table, lectern, and pulpit, or whether to follow a liturgical church year calendar, or where to place the pulpit. We may think these absurd compared to the decisions we wrestle with today, but they were not absurd for those involved in making them in their day. In fact, the church often split over issues such as these.

In the reading from Matthew today the weeds that were planted among the wheat were tares or cheat weeds. These are almost indistinguishable from wheat, except that they are poisonous. And they couldn't be torn out without harming the wheat crop. Often times weeds are like that – they disguise themselves so well, taking on shape and color of the “good” plant that they grow beside. I had a weed like that come up in my garden this spring. I recognized it as baptista, false indigo, a plant that blooms gorgeous dark blue flowers in spring. I went online to look carefully at photos of real baptista to compare the plant. So sure was I that I was growing the “real” thing that I purchased two other baptista plants to compliment the rogue. No sooner had I planted these than I realized my error and had to uproot

the imposter and go back to the nursery for a third real baptista.

When Jesus tries to tell the people what the real Kingdom of God is like, so that they can properly discern weeds from wheat, what he tells them is not quite what they anticipate. Sometimes what they think are weeds are really wheat and what they think is wheat is really weeds. As an example, a mustard seed was not something that was planted intentionally. It was usually unintentionally found in bags of other seed. It was a weed. Leaven was not anything special – it was just spoiled leftover bread which if allowed to spoil too long would result in food poisoning. A pearl is just a piece of sand that irritates the oyster. But these ordinary things, when given to God, were used to great benefit and not harm. A scrumptious double chocolate mouse cake with oreo crust and rich whipped cream topping is decadent to a dieter and disastrous to one with diabetes, but to most of us it looks pretty good. In the Kingdom of God, things fool us. Ordinary things, even seemingly bad things are taken by God and transformed for good. The Kingdom of God is down to earth – it is all around us every day – it is found in ordinary people doing every day tasks. The Kingdom of God is not far off, it is very near to us. The Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of the marginalized, the unclean, the left out, but when these are touched by the Holy they become sacred, of surpassing great value.

The point of Jesus' discourse on weeds and wheat is this. We each belong to God and the Kingdom belongs, not only to us, but to God, and God will be the judge of what is weed and what is wheat, what is good and what is evil, who is out and who is in, not us. When we try to judge our fellow Christians we commit a great sin for in doing so we try to become God. Rather than judge, rather than ask to be excused from the table, we are asked to stay. We are commanded to stay at the table because that is the heart of the community, that is the heart of Christ. That is the place where we learn to patiently hold the holy and purposeful paradoxes of our lives as Christians. Together.

If we asked to be excused from the table we commit another sin – we break the unity of the body of Christ. The body of Christ has been broken enough, we do not need to add to its brokenness. As Christians we must stay together, in whatever local community such as Poland Presbyterian Church to which we have been called. We must wrestle with the questions together and continue to love one another despite our mixed and murky views. In the end we must trust God to judge and if we are wrong to have mercy upon us. For we know that there is nothing – no issue that we are called to struggle with – no differing opinions, that can ever separate us – either for one another or from God's love.

This is an exciting time for us as we are receiving many new members. We have other congregations visiting with us and discerning if this is the place they are called to make their church home. Now these people are not going to

necessarily have the same views on issues that we have. They will bring their own diversity of understandings just as we have our. We are not all the same. And if we want to be in a church where everyone thinks exactly like we do we are going to miss the dessert. Christ calls us all to take his words and struggle with them, ponder them, pray with them, try our best to figure out what they mean. We learn from one another how to be the beloved community. Each one of you has a valuable part to play in this.

And there is yet another reason to stay at the table. We may never taste the sweetness, or hold the pearl of great price, or find the great treasure which is the Kingdom of God on earth, unless we are willing to give up our own sure convictions that we are indeed the ones who have got it right and the rest are the ones who have got it wrong. Unless we take the bitter with the sweet, unless we stay and listen to one another, unless we stay and at least lovingly tolerate our differences, we will never get that piece of scrumptious double chocolate mouse cake with oreo crust and whipped cream topping that is waiting for us. Amen.