

God's Love and the Body of Christ

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The Reception of New Members: Moe Alters, Becky M^cVicker, Carol Snyder

Today is a day for celebrating the life of the church, both here at Zion with the reception of new members, and well beyond the four walls of our Sanctuary with our reporting about the work that was done at the Northeastern Ohio Synod Assembly last Saturday in Akron. Carol Rossbach and Steve Ross were there on our behalf. Carol has been to quite a few Synod assemblies. She has become very experienced at reporting on these one-day, cut-and-dry, very business-oriented assemblies. Her report will appear in the June edition of *The Zion Herald*. This was Steve's first experience as a delegate to a church assembly. I warned him ahead of time against succumbing to the awe of the general sense of holiness that happens when bishops descend upon a gathering filled with hundreds of clergy and lots of church VIP types. For first-time delegates, it can be like Oz, when the curtain is lifted and you see that Christ's Church made up of people no different from the rest of us. There are no wizards with magical powers ready to lift us above the problems that fill our lives. What we discover is that we're in this together, sustained by God's promise to see us through the challenges we face, by providing the gifts that are given through the people God has gathered to respond to the call that we become engaged in the work of the church and the cause of God's kingdom.

One of my favorite books about the life of the church is a book written by Paul Minear entitled *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, which, as the title suggests, talks about images of the church in the New Testament, images like the church as *kingdom of God*, *light of the world*, *city on a hill*, *new Israel*, *new community*, *family of faith*, *people of God*. One of the favorite images of God's people in the Old Testament was a forerunner to last Sunday's great "I AM" saying, where Jesus referred to himself as the true Vine. "*I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.*" (John 15:5) The point of this image is to draw our focus to the internal relationship that connects us with God as the source of all that we need in life, as the very ground of life itself. It really works as an image that describes how God's love pulses through our lives, not simply outside of us as the rain waters the earth, but deep within, welling up from inside of us like living water, internal to everything we do and everything we are.

As I said, it works wonderfully as an image that describes this internal relationship with God, but not so well as an image of the church as the community of God's people. Why do I say this? Well, the result of this image, its fruit, is a bunch of grapes, each existing independently of the others, with no more of a connection to each other than their being there for the taking, to be eaten one grape at a time. The Old Testament did more to broaden the image of the vineyard as a symbol for both how God loved Israel and what God expected from her. Davie Napier, formerly a Professor of Bible at Yale University, who died at the age of 91 in 2007, used this image as the organizing theme of his guide through the Old Testament entitled *Song of the Vineyard*. "*Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it out, cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it.*"

The owner looked for the vines in his vineyard to yield grapes; but they yielded only wild grapes. These are the opening verses in one of the older poems found in Isaiah, chapter 5.

Our new *Lutheran Study Bible* explains the significance this way: “The prophet uses the form of a love song to create a parable that invites the hearers to accuse themselves for their own failures, inviting the listeners to appreciate both the loving care of the owner for his vineyard and his disappointment when it yields wild grapes that are bitter and sour, unusable.” All who were familiar with the world of vines and vineyards, wines and vintners would agree that the only remedy was seriously radical, namely, total destruction of the old to make way for the new; and that is precisely what Isaiah reports. “*And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, you be the judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do that I have not done? Still, when I expected it to yield grapes, it yielded only wild grapes.*” So, the owner says what he is going to do. He is going to remove its protective hedge, break down the wall that protects it from intruders, so that it shall be trampled down and devoured. It shall not be pruned or hoed, so that it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns. The Lord will command the clouds that rain not rain upon the vineyard. “*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the people of Judah. I expected justice, but found only bloodshed. I looked for righteousness, but heard only a cry*”— a whimpering cry for help associated with the plight of the lost, the lowly, those abandoned, forgotten, and ignored.

I may have taken some liberties with Isaiah’s poetry, but the point is unchanged, for this imagery is not just about our internal relationship with God. There is clearly a lot of judgment going on in this text, because this is an image that is rich in addressing what God expects from those whom He has called His people. A bunch of grapes standing alone, with no connection to the quality of life each enjoys alone or all enjoy together is not the point of the fruit God intends for his vine and vineyard. The life that bears fruit is one where God’s love informs the justice we practice, where Jesus’ concern for the lost and the lowly is what drives our love for one another and our witness to the world. This gift of God’s love and the promise of our salvation: these are not just for each of us standing alone, like a grape standing alone in a bunch, each with its own destiny unrelated to the others. The church is the place where the gifts of God’s love and our salvation come together for us. This is where the social implications of Old Testament imagery move us in the right direction for understanding what God desires for His people. We are not called to be individual grapes in a bunch on a vine, but God’s new wine, which is Isaiah’s hope and Jesus’ promise. The imagery of new wine is used in the New Testament to talk about the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives, signaling how the church will be a witness to what God desires for the world. This reinforces the Good News of the Gospel, which is not who each one of us is standing alone but what we are together. For it is this social image – new *community, family* of faith, *kingdom* of God – that captures the purpose of salvation and the aim of God’s love.

This past Thursday, the Church celebrated Ascension Day, that great transitional moment when the body of the crucified Jesus, which walked this earth for the thirty-plus years that Jesus lived among us, became present in a new way, namely, through the Body of Christ, which is the Church. Ascension Day asks the question, “Where in the world is the body of Jesus?” The Festival of Pentecost provides the answer, “The Body of Christ has taken up

residence in the life of the Church!” Those folks who spoke in every sort of native language on the first Pentecost were not drunk with new wine (Acts 2:13). They were the new wine, which is the Old Testament hope for God’s vineyard, and the New Testament promise of new life, which is ours through the Spirit’s indwelling each of us individually and all of us together. Clearly, this Sunday, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, the Sunday that lifts up Jesus’ high priestly prayer for church unity, takes on special meaning in light of its falling as it does between Ascension Day and Pentecost. For if the Church is, in fact, Christ’s Body on earth, then our unity is a crucial sign of what we are as the real presence of the Body of Christ.

I mentioned that we would be talking about the Synod Assembly, and one of the signature moments that Carol has identified as capturing a high point of the Synod assemblies she has attended the last couple of years comes when Bishop Elizabeth Eaton has each delegate (and visitor) take a moment to look at each of the delegates gathered in our large meeting room at the John S. Knight Center in downtown Akron. Bishop Eaton then invites us to take note of the fact that “we” are the Synod. The Synod is people, not its institutions, but individuals gathered throughout northeast Ohio who love the Lord, offering our worship, and committed to serving God with everything that we have and all that we can do. The key question is not *what is a Synod* but *who is the Synod*, to which the correct response is “*we are the Synod*” – which, in the spirit of our Bishop, is very down-to-earth, very practical, and very personal.

Steve Ross also has a very practical and personal vision for the church. In leading a Bible study for the Men of Zion at our monthly meeting in May, Steve opened his Bible to the story of the paralytic in Mark 2. He didn’t focus on the miraculous power of Jesus to heal the paralytic. He didn’t focus on the divine authority of Jesus to claim the power to forgive sins. Rather, he focused on the four friends who carried the paralytic to Jesus, lifted him up to the roof, then lowered him down through the ceiling, in an effort to help him. These other issues – accessing God’s healing power, understanding Jesus’ authority to forgive – are the kind of issues that a biblical scholar or theologian might pursue; but Steve was comfortable focusing on a group of men organizing their effort to help a friend, which is precisely what Steve has done with the Men of Zion, who spent a Saturday morning at the Riffles, spreading mulch and tending to some outside chores, while Rick focused on the challenges of rehab at Edwin Shaw. Here we see a vision for the church that is down-to-earth, practical, and personal.

This is a very good picture of who we are at Zion, a church family whose vision for our church is very down-to-earth, practical and personal. This is who we are and what we do on the first and third Tuesdays with our Food Pantry and Clothing Closet. This is who we are and what we do on the second and fourth Thursdays when the Comfort Givers gather to sew quilts. This is who we are and what we do when we gather for food and fellowship, for bible study and worship: very down-to-earth, very practical, and very personal as we work to make a difference in the church and for the world. Whether we are thinking about the church with its global reach through the ELCA, in its regional outreach through the Northeastern Ohio Synod, or locally here at Zion, the church family we are and offer to our new members is very personal in nature and very practical in expression. Put simply, we are a people seeking to be empowered by God’s love and guided by God’s righteousness in building up the community we celebrate and working hard at the witness we offer ... in Jesus’ name. Amen

The Reception of New Members: Maureen “Moe” Alters, Carol Snyder, Becky McVicker

P: Brothers and sisters in Christ: In Holy Baptism our Lord Jesus Christ received us and made us members of his Church. In the community of God’s people, we have learned from his Word God’s loving purpose for us and all creation. We have been nourished at his holy table and called to be witnesses of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, therefore, I ask you to profess your faith in Jesus Christ, reject sin, and confess the faith of the Church, the faith in which we baptize. Do you renounce the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises?

C: We do.

P: Do you believe in God the Father?

C: I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

P: Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

C: I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

P: Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

C: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen

P: Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, and for all people according to their needs.

A: That we may be redeemed from all evil and rescued from the way of sin and death; that the Holy Spirit may open our hearts to the fullness of your grace and truth; that we may be kept in the faith and communion of your Holy Church; that we may be sent into the world in witness to your love; that we may come to enjoy the gift of your peace and the fullness of your glory: Lord, in your mercy,

C: Hear our prayer.

P: Lord Jesus, you prayed that your disciples might be united in a unity that is grounded in the oneness that you share with the Father and the Holy Spirit; may your prayer for unity reach into the hearts and minds of all Christians; may we be one in our pursuit of justice, one in our love for you, and one in our commitment to service: Lord, in your mercy,

C: Hear our prayer.

P: Moe, Carol, and Becky, you have made public profession of your faith. Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism: to live among God’s faithful people, to hear His Word and share in his supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth? If so, respond with your fellow members by saying,

C: We do, and we ask God to help and guide us.

P: Gracious Lord, through water and the spirit you have made us your own. You have forgiven our sins and brought us to the newness of life. Continue to strengthen us with the Holy Spirit, and daily increase in us your gifts of grace: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

C: Amen