> As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. *Matthew 13:20-21*

Rocky Ground

This coming Sunday is World Communion Sunday, a day commemorated by Christians around the world, remembering that at the table of grace, we are all connected with each other and with Jesus Christ.

It is also the Sunday when many of our churches receive the Peace and Global Witness special offering. This offering is used to promote the peace of Christ by addressing systems of conflict and injustice across the world. The offering supports peacemaking efforts at multiple levels:

- 25% is retained by congregations to support peacemaking efforts in their local communities.
- 25% is retained by mid councils to support peacemaking efforts at the regional level.
- 50% supports peacemaking, reconciliation and global witness at the national level.

This comes at a critical time close to home. We do not like to admit it, but all of us have seen direct impacts on our quality of life, or that of people close to us, due to the concerted efforts of the powerful to dismantle many of the checks and balances that have kept the United States more or less peaceful for our 249-year history. While we Americans have often heard about conflicts in nations thousands of miles away and wondered how it could get this bad, much of the rest of the world is now watching us and wondering what happened. The extremes of rage, gun violence, and despair have resulted in regular occurrences of mass shootings in schools and churches, such as the attack on a Mormon church in Michigan that just happened during worship yesterday. Higher education and the press are being attacked. Human services are being reduced, hurting immigrants, the poor, and ironically many of the states that have been most supportive of the current administration—and either misinformation or fear and vengeance keep the people from seeing how they are hurting themselves.

I do not like to exaggerate, but I'm starting to feel that more than at any time in the history of the United States (except during the Civil War), we are in danger of losing the rights and freedoms we assumed was an integral part of being American. And for a nation that has at times claimed to be a "Christian nation," the basic tenets of Christ's teachings are being forgotten—and worse, people are being hurt in God's name. What do we do?

Too many North American Christians have taken the approach that faith and politics do not mix, or are even prohibited by the IRS. The very notion that we curtail our prophetic voice in deference to the IRS is problematic, but it's also inaccurate. I would challenge people to consider whether we find it more convenient to pretend we are not allowed to apply our Christian values to our public behavior and political/economic choices. But Presbyterians are especially clear that we need to live our entire lives—not just Sunday mornings—in the light of Christ. In fact, I just shared with the soon-to-be Presbyterians at Interwoven the list of constitutionally-prescribed forms of witness outlined in G-1.0304, the Ministry of Membership, which include:

- proclaiming the good news in word and deed,
- studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life,
- supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,

- responding to God's activity in the world through service to others,
- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment,
- caring for God's creation . . .

We miss the mark on many of these responsibilities, I believe because of the cost of discipleship—the feared loss of status, acceptance, or wealth if we followed Jesus' way. The word of God does not always find fertile ground in us. In Matthew 13:20-23, Jesus is unusually explicit in interpreting the parable of the sower:

> ". . . what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

I am as guilty as anyone else in allowing my fear or greed or comfort level to stunt the fruitfulness of my faith. Nearly every decision we make reflects our faithfulness—how we spend our money, when we speak our truth, who we speak with to either understand another perspective or to connect with others to confront a larger evil. One of my current frustrations is the perpetuation of a binary view of the world, where everyone is forced into one of two camps, and in order to connect on one topic, you must agree on all the others. But we need to learn how to respect and work with people who don't agree with us on everything.

From the very start, Jesus called together people from opposing backgrounds to serve God and love each other. Certainly if we are to celebrate World Communion Sunday, there will be people at Christ's table who see some things quite differently from each of us. Love for Christ does not demand uniformity of thought—the entire history of the Christian church, from day one, proved that. So we should be better than anyone at connecting with diverse people for a larger cause.

May we be true to Christ's call, and respect all the different ways and different people in following Christ, that together we may confront the mounting conflicts in our world with peace and forbearance. In short, may we see each other as Christ sees us, and do as Christ would do.

Blessings,

