

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, May 3, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
The Vineyard

This week, my first week, with you in the church office, has been an immersion into this beloved community. My week was intense and fruitful. It was filled with introductions to many of you, with meetings with staff, meeting the choir, a brief encounter with those of you present at yesterday's work day, and with the delightful experience of attending "Morningside After Dark" last Monday evening. This community event was indeed a wonderful evening and brought so many from the community into our building. This week also was filled with the resolution of some technology challenges as well as the simple challenge of starting a new job. Thanks to all of you who offered messages of greeting and support. I also found myself all week, looking forward to being together with you in worship this morning. I love to lead and to participate in worship. I love to renew my spirit each week. Thank you for welcoming me into this community. Thank you for being here and for your on-going commitments to this community. It is a joy for me to be among you.

We the faith community known as Edina Morningside Community Church, United Church of Christ, are part of God's vineyard. Churches often behave as though this vineyard belongs to the members or especially to those long-term members who have been faithful in attendance and in support over many years or even decades. Lay members give faithfully of their time, talent and finances. It is right and good that they feel a sense of ownership and pride in their labors. However, it is always important to keep in mind that it is God's vineyard and not ours.

There may also be a tendency to think that this vineyard may belong to the pastor and other staff. Is not the pastor called by the church to be the keeper of the vineyard? And does not the church leadership want the pastor to have a sense of ownership over the maintenance, care and nourishment required to have this vineyard be productive? Again, we must keep in mind that it is God's vineyard and not the pastor's.

In today's scripture text from the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "*I am the true vine, and God is the vinegrower.*" As we begin our interim ministry time together today, I profess that this text is an important foundation for understanding how we may work together in interim ministry. We the faith community known as Edina Morningside Community Church, United Church of Christ, during this interim time are part of God's vineyard. Everything that we do - in worship, in our music, in our fellowship, in our Christian education, in our youth and family faith formation activities, in our preschool, in our various in-reach and out-reach ministries, in our care for one another, in our time together as friends, in our committee meetings, in our stewardship of time and financial resources, and in our personal spiritual practices - is done with an awareness that we are God's vineyard - - and not our own. We clearly choose to invest deeply in this vineyard, but our investment is not to produce earnings for ourselves, but to produce fruit for God, to serve God's mission in the world.

In God's vineyard, Jesus is the vine. Hear again, these words of Jesus: *"I am the vine, you are the branches."* Each of us, through our baptism, through our membership and engagement in this faith community, and through our commitment to live a Christian life declares that Jesus is our vine, that we are branches connected to Jesus as the vine, and that we seek to be a part of God's vineyard. We are connected to Jesus because of his birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection. We are connected to Jesus because of his healing ministry. We are connected to Jesus because of his ability to perform miracles. We are connected to Jesus because of his teachings. We are connected to Jesus because of his inclusivity to outsiders. We are connected to Jesus because of his willingness to stand up against injustice. We are connected to Jesus because of the love he has demonstrated for us.

The mission of God's vineyard is to bear fruit. Our second scripture text this morning from the Book of Acts is a clear example of how the early church bore fruit. This text describes a unique encounter between an early disciple, Phillip, and an Ethiopian Eunuch. When the Eunuch asked for help in understanding the scripture that he was reading, we hear these words: *"Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus."* Clearly, the church is called since its inception and today to spread the good news. Let it be so for us.

In our gospel text, Jesus gives us further guidance for how to bear fruit in these words: *"Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me."* Biblical commentator Barbara Essex says about today's text, *"Thus, Jesus takes the common everyday image of the vine and transforms it into a symbol of community, mission, and love. This community is characterized by interdependence, mutual respect, and the ongoing presence of Christ."*¹ I believe these three characteristics are guideposts for our interim ministry. We are interdependent with one another. No one can go it alone. No one is fully responsible for everything. We depend on each other to tend God's vineyard. Secondly, our interdependence can only be realized when we covenant to have mutual respect for one another. Mutual respect requires open communication as well as the willingness to listen to others, even when we may disagree with them. Thirdly, our ministry needs always to call upon the presence of Christ, not just formally in our worship experience, but when we make decisions about our budget, about how we care for our facility, about all our priorities for mission and ministries. As we work together in the coming months, please keep these characteristics in mind: interdependence, mutual respect and the ongoing presence of Christ.

I have come down to join you in the sanctuary, because I want you to understand that all of us are branches in this vineyard. I am one branch among the many branches on this vine.

Several people have asked me what I want to be called. My answer is that I am Howard. There are, obviously, times when I may introduce myself or you may introduce me to others as Pastor Howard or Rev. Bell. As a child I was called Howdy. Since I grew up near

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the Appalachians, the standard response I received when I introduced myself as Howdy was, "Howdy, Howdy". I do believe each person thought that they were the first to think of that. So you may call me what you choose. But please know that it is my desire to be one minister among many ministers. To know each of you by name and to be known by mine.

You are all ministers. You are all branches on this vine. We are all committing to be engaged in interim ministry.

I am now standing here on the outside because I want you to fully understand that there are at least three ways in which I am not fully a part of the congregation. The first is that I am serving here as your Interim Pastor. Your search committee and church cabinet selected me. I believe that God also was part of the discernment process both for this church in selecting me and in my discernment to accept your offer to serve as your Interim Pastor. Secondly, there are unique responsibilities that have been identified for me to fulfill. In addition to performing the normal pastoral functions of preaching and teaching God's word, of administering the sacraments, of offering pastoral care, and of administrative oversight over the staff and all the ministries of this community; I am also here to give unique guidance for this transitional time using my training and the best practices of interim ministry. Thirdly, I am here amongst you in this particular section of God's vineyard only for a period of time. My contract is for one year. It can be renewed until such a time as this community has successfully called a new settled pastor. As you are probably aware, I will not be a candidate to be your settled pastor. When the new settled pastor is called, I will no longer be among you. As part of my covenant with your new settled minister, I covenant to not interfere with his or her relationship to each of you by not continuing relationships with congregation members and by not continuing to serve in any pastoral role once this interim period has ended. This does not mean, however, that I will not continue to care for you in my heart or to pray for you. My branch will be cut off from this vine.

Interim ministry is not simply a time in-between settled ministries. It is a time rich with challenges and opportunities. It is a time for lay leadership to reassert itself following a long-term settled ministry. It is a time for pruning of the vine when needed. It is a time for growing new branches. It is a time for envisioning a new future together. I am excited about learning together how we will do all these things.

I close this message, with one further reminder. Whether in interim ministry or in settled ministry, the church is not the church, the church is not truly God's vineyard, if we keep the fruit all unto ourselves. The church's mission must extend into our world. All that we do in worship and all that we do to tend to God's vineyard will be in vain if we do not leave the vineyard to be ambassadors for Jesus, to walk the Jesus path in our daily lives, to spread the good news of the gospel, to be of service to those in need, and to work for justice in a world filled with injustice, inequality, racial divide, and conflict within countries and between countries. May the fruits of God's vineyard be shared with a world in need. Amen.