

Jesus said: 33 "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." 42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"? 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us,  
for the Word of God within us: Thanks be to God.

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It was 1872. The Elyton Land Company, a group of speculators, had bought up a bunch of property in hopes of launching the city of Birmingham as the industrial center of the South. To attract new businesses and residents, they were giving away lots to build churches, and one of those lots was given to what would eventually be our church—the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham. So, the church building of the Old School Presbyterian Church in Elyton was taken apart, placed on wagons, brought to Birmingham, and put back together at the corner of 21<sup>st</sup> St and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue North (the first church building in the new city), and a congregation was organized with a grand total of seven members.

“And thus,” [reading from the booklet from the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration] “was the vine planted and the workers placed in the vineyard.”

### **But what did that vineyard look like?**

Well, the Civil War had just ended, seven years earlier, so the nation was still very divided. The South was in the midst of Reconstruction, through which newly-freed Black people were voting for the first time, being elected to state and national offices, and were a driving force behind establishing free public education for the first time in the South. But Reconstruction was rapidly seguing into what white Southerners called “Redemption,” the violent backlash against the new freedom of Black people. Federal Troops were being withdrawn, Black Codes were being

passed and brutally enforced, beginning a period that has been called “slavery by another name”. Just eleven years after our founding was the first recorded lynching in Birmingham, and it took place in Linn Park—just a five-minute walk from our church.

Meanwhile, just the second year of our church’s existence, a devastating cholera epidemic swept the city of Birmingham. Two members of the church died, including the pastor’s wife, and “little progress was made in the church “ for a full year.

Then, just as the epidemic was abating, the financial Panic of 1873 led into a global depression that lasted for years.

So, our church was founded at a time of great national division, violent racial turmoil, epidemic, and economic crisis. Does that sound familiar?

The church was not growing as they’d hoped, so, in 1875 the members called their first full-time pastor. For the next several years, as the City grew, so did the church. They participated in several revivals, each of which brought in many new members; and they sent members out to form Mission Sabbath schools all around the City. These were, essentially, Sunday Schools, which were used to evangelize neighborhood children and adults. Many of these Mission Sabbath schools eventually became new Presbyterian Churches—Second Presbyterian on the west

side, Third Presbyterian on the South Side, Avondale Presbyterian to the east; and more. Just twenty-five years into its existence, a total of 1,151 members had passed through the church, many of them being sent out to found Presbyterian organizations in and around the city, including “the South Highlands, Central, Woodlawn and East Lake churches.”

And they were doing this, at the same time that they were contending with all the challenges I’ve already mentioned, and, in 1888, finally erecting a new building to call home. That first building, from Elyton, was taken apart once again, and moved to the corner right behind the church—where the Redmont now stands—and our current building was built at a cost of \$33,500, which was a stretch for the young congregation.

How did they manage? Well, the same booklet says the following: “By the labor and energy of the women of the church the manse of the church was completed at a cost of \$2,500...carpets and furniture, \$500...the pipe organ, \$3,500...the balance of the...debt from the church, \$2,000...frescoing the walls of the church, \$300. Making a total of \$10,800 which only represents a part of the labor of love they have given the church; helping the poor, visiting the sick, encouraging the weak...To this arm of the church we owe more for the success achieved than to all other combined.”

And so, by the time Rev. Handley leaves in 1890, they've grown the congregation, started several others, and built the new church; and they have gone from seven members to 350; and by their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary a few years later, they would have 443.

The vineyard had been well-planted.

So, a vineyard. Given our scripture readings both from Isaiah and from Matthew, a vineyard as a metaphor can be problematic. In Jesus' parable in Matthew, we see that it's easy for the workers in the vineyard to forget who actually owns it; and to claim fruit that is not theirs.

And in Isaiah, the vineyard is used to grow fruit that the owner never intended: "God expected justice," it reads, "but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!"

So, it is vital, for those who first build a church and for those who, like us, are entrusted with it later, to keep in front of us two questions: to whom does the church belong, and what is it intended to grow.

So, to whom does the church belong? Does the church belong to the people who built it? Does it belong to the past, so that it's a museum rather than mission? Does it belong to a particular power structure or status quo or set of members? Or does ownership belong elsewhere? If we get the answer wrong, it leads to all sorts of bad outcomes—bloodshed instead of justice, a cry of fear instead of righteousness. But if we get the answer right, then it leads to clarity on the second question: the question of what we are intended to do. Our mission.

We will see those questions of ownership and mission emerge again and again as we progress through our church's timeline.

Those questions, and the question of perseverance, which Paul notes in our reading from Philippians, because those hard times at the very beginning of this congregation won't be the last. Again and again, this church has had to struggle with how to keep on.

But here's what they did at the outset—those first, First Presbyterians, working in this strange new vineyard of Birmingham. First: they did keep on, through epidemic and loss and struggle. Second: they kept looking outward. Rather than hoard all the fruits of their labors for themselves and their congregation, they kept sending people and money out into the field, recognizing that they were called to be part of something bigger than themselves.

As are we. Because, like them, we are part of a church that spans all times and places—something we are called to remember on World Communion Sunday.

And, like them, our church is very much a part of the world. What's happening in the world—division and racial turmoil and epidemics and economic crises—has direct impact on the church, and how we respond as a church has a direct impact on the world.

So, to whom does our church belong, what is our mission, and how do we respond faithfully to events in our city and our world. The first members here didn't have all the answers, and neither do we, but like them, we press on. As Paul says:

... I press on to make [the goal] my own, because Christ Jesus has made *me* his own... forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

We press on, just as Paul did, just as our forebears did. As we revisit their stories, we will see places where they stumbled, and we will see places where they transcended the expectations of their time with courage and faith. We press on, hoping to learn from their mistakes and their triumphs, and hoping to stay clear about whose we are, and what we are about.

Because the One to whom this vineyard belongs is expecting a harvest. Let's hope that the fruits we offer will please the One who planted us here.

