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St. Margaret's Episcopal Church, Annapolis
Sermon for *Proper 12, Year C*
July 29, 2007:

Tending the Vines of Justice

Colossians 2:6-15, Ps. 138, Luke 11:1-13

Jesus lived in complicated times. Roman fat cats stole the resources of the land. They helped themselves to the first fruits of the harvest. They drained the region of some of its finest resources to supply their homes and temples with marble and cedar, with wine and fish. The poor worked the land as tenant farmers in the service of absentee land owners, outsiders who did not value the religion and customs of the local Jewish people. Jesus arrived in the midst of these complicated times to announce that God's kingdom has come to earth... the reign of God has begun! Jesus arrived to proclaim the good news of God's justice for all of creation – for the poor especially, and even for those rich fat cats enjoying the first fruits.

Our resurrected Jesus is still living in complicated times. Jesus is alive and working among the people of Appalachia, whose situation is a complicated one. Eight of us from St. Margaret's, and many others from the diocese and elsewhere, spent this past week in Wise County, Virginia where we learned about the scars left behind from the coal and lumber industries. Large corporations mine the riches of the region, taking the first fruits far away. The scars remain on the landscape and the people. For many generations the poor of Appalachia have worked in dangerous conditions to supply the resources the fat cats have desired. Or so I used to think.

During my first mission trip to Appalachia in 2001 I became enraged over the injustice of the coal industry. I saw the cold-hearted, profit-driven coal companies preying on the desperation of hungry oppressed people. I made the coal industry into a monster worth slaying. Since then I have discovered that it is more complicated than that- which is usually the hard truth of a matter. I was very unhappy to learn that coal, one of the first fruits of Appalachia, services my desire for dependable electricity in suburban Maryland. Crazy as it may be for some of you to believe this, I truly did not realize until recently that coal is used to generate electricity. It generates the electricity I depend on to crank up the AC, cook dinner for my family, charge my cell phone and listen to music all at the same time. Our dependence on un-renewable sources to fuel our lifestyles complicates the Appalachian situation. I may not feel like a coal company fat cat, but I sure am guilty of using coal-generated electricity with wild abandon. God is calling us to pay attention to this- to be mindful of these complicated ways we affect one another.

I am happy to report that there is good news for our brothers and sisters in Appalachia: the economy in appears to be slowly improving. While the economy is gaining some momentum, this good news is tempered by the fact that large segments of the population are living in poverty, complicated further by disability, chemical dependency and other challenges. Jesus is alive in Appalachia – announcing the reign of God to all who have ears to hear it—those who prosper and those who struggle to survive. Jesus is at work in a roadside market, where the proprietor Peggy drives around in her pickup truck each morning to bring locally grown produce from one

neighbor's farm to another neighbor's table. I wish you all could see and smell the abundance of Appalachia at Peggy's Produce, or nearby Hick's Market. There were baskets piled high with vegetables I had never seen or heard of before... like greasy beans, half runner beans, Kentucky wonders, pink tomatoes, Mr. Stripey heirloom tomatoes... These first fruits of Appalachia startle the senses. God is at work in the abundance of the local farms, and in other ways that people seek to find health and wholeness right around them.

Like in the way one local family has redeemed a coal-mined mountainside to plant a vineyard. The coal was extracted, the mountain "re-countoured" as the coal companies say, "re-countoured" to resemble the former shape of the mountain. The ancient mountain's surface has been loosely repacked after mining. On this mountainside a family has planted grape vines in that loosened ground, and their vineyard is thriving. I was especially interested to hear that before the mountain was mined and re-packed, vines could not take root. The ground was too packed, too firm for vines to take root and grow. As the roots of the grape vines take hold in ground that has been torn apart and mined, so we long to reach down into the complicated depths. As the roots reach deeper into the rubble remains and seek nourishment, so we reach deeper into the places where we find nourishment for continuing to tend those vines of justice that Jesus planted in the loosened surface of the earth. We continue the work of tending the vineyard of God's reign on earth. We reach deep down to pray, to be in relationship with our loving Creator. We pray in the words that Jesus taught us: thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Today I beg each of you, for the sake of those living with poverty, illness and addiction in Appalachia and in every other place—I beg you to **use your imagination**. Put your imagination to the holy task of envisioning how earth can be transformed into heaven. How the complicated ways we live together on earth can be reconciled to God and to what God desires of us. How rubble on a hillside can produce the wine of celebration.

I beg you to become visionaries of that same reign of God that Jesus arrived to proclaim – to look out into the world and find places where God's justice requires a visionary, a champion. If we are serious when we pray: thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven... if we are serious at all about this, then we need to have some idea of what that heavenly kingdom looks like. Then we can look around us and spot the places where the heavenly kingdom is being manifested on earth, where the reign of God is taking shape and transforming Creation. We see glimpses of the already-here-yet-not-yet-fully reign of God when we see the evil of social and economic division toppled by a singular focus on being Christ's hands at work in the world.

As we labored in Appalachia this past week, we prayed this prayer Jesus taught us no less than twenty-eight times, just ask Emilia, Sara, Heather, Brennan, Carly, Elizabeth or Colleen to vouch for that fact. We prayed this prayer regularly as we worked to build stairs, to roof a house, to install a bathroom. As we labored to do what we could do to make a few homes safe, warm and dry, I began to hear the words of this prayer fresh. It has become clear to me that Jesus intends these words to reach deep into the souls of those living in complicated times. That Jesus teaches us, all of us, how to interact with the Creator using words that move us into God's reign of justice. Jesus lived in complicated times and STILL lives in complicated times. Whether in the Galilean countryside or in the hollers and mountaintops of Appalachia, or here on a peninsula on the Chesapeake Bay, Jesus

is still right here with us, proclaiming the reign of God and announcing God's vision of justice for all of creation.

Each one of us is called to work in the vineyard of God's reign, to imagine the ways God calls us to transform earth into heaven. We are called to imagine it and make it a reality. We are called to plant vines where rubble has been piled and tend those vines until the first fruits can be held up toward heaven and offered as a sign of God's continued desire to reconcile us to God's own self, earthly complications and all.