

“The Vineyard of St. Timothy’s”  
Rev. Michael Carney October 5, 2008

*Let me sing for my beloved  
my love-song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.  
He dug it and cleared it of stones,  
and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watch-tower in the midst of it,  
and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
he expected it to yield grapes,  
but it yielded wild grapes.  
Isaiah 5:1-2*

I’m head-over-heels in love with aspen trees. Marsha and I had seen them before coming to Colorado, but we didn’t fully understand. We associated them with hot summer days in southern Utah, when we’d escape from the heat of the red rock country into the cool shade of the mountains. The white trunks of the trees and their rustling leaves were beautiful, but we’d never been in Colorado in the fall.

Appreciation turned to love last September, when we drove down 285 and saw brilliant colors splashed across the hillsides: yellow and gold and orange shading into red; when we hiked the Colorado trail at Kenosha Pass and submerged ourselves in all those colors; when I laid down on my back in a grove and watched the leaves moving against the blue sky and floating gently down to the ground. That’s when I began to see them as possible subjects of a love-song for a treasured place in creation.

When I remember the Hebrew prophets, love-songs are not the first things that come to mind. I think of stern admonitions to obey the words of the LORD, warnings of the consequences if we fail to respond, oracles of doom for the future of Israel. But today we heard a surpassingly beautiful poem from the prophet Isaiah, singing a long-song for his beloved vineyard. In case we might take for granted what the Creation means to the LORD, the picture is clearly painted: A place and a people lovingly shaped, provided with all that is necessary for a fruitful harvest, watched over day and night by their creator.

Besides representing Israel, the vineyard in Isaiah's parable is symbolic as an image of the created world. The sense of wonder and awe that I found among the aspen trees can be extended throughout our beautiful world. Signs of God's hand at work are everywhere, as poet Walt Whitman wrote of finding "the handkerchief of the Lord, a scented gift and remembrancer, designedly dropt, bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark and say, *Whose?*" (*Song of Myself*, 6) If we're paying attention, we'll notice the signs of God's love around us every day.

In the culture of ancient Israel, the vineyard was also a symbol of wealth. Developing one took a substantial amount of resources and lots of work: to clear the stones and plant the vines and prepare the wine vat. A serious investment of time was required as well, since the plants needed to be watered and weeded and pruned for years before beginning to bear fruit. Once mature, however, a vineyard can produce for a century or more, making it a great blessing for the family to whom it belongs.

On a third symbolic level, Isaiah's vineyard represents our relationship with God. We—individually and collectively—have been created in love, nurtured and watched over. We've been given gifts which enable us to grow and flourish, and God waits expectantly for the fruits of our harvest. Hopefully we'll produce the good grapes which can be made into delicious wine, not useless wild grapes that will be rejected by the vintner.

Take a moment to think of St. Timothy's as a vineyard. First of all, we see our church as a special place in the world set apart for God. In our worship and study, in our music and fellowship, as we reach out into the community, the presence of Jesus is strongly felt. Not that God isn't everywhere, but in the congregation we look for signs of God at work and show God's face to each other. This place where we gather is sacred, a sanctuary dedicated to God.

St. Tim's vineyard is also filled with the wealth of God's kingdom. Primarily we're blessed by the presence of so many wonderful people and the variety of gifts you bring. Thanks to your offerings we're in the middle of an abundant harvest—think of the exceptional blessings we've been receiving lately. After a long period of raising funds and searching for the right candidate, The Rev. Sandy Blake will soon be joining us as Associate Priest. She brings talents and experience and a heart for serving—what an exciting addition to our gifted staff!

You can see from recent baptisms that some wonderful families have entered into the parish. Shanda just signed up the largest mission trip team

we've ever had, and we're looking at a major expansion of our youth facilities. By switching the nursery and the youth room, we can create a better area for babies while tripling the space available for youth programs. And last month we celebrated a "progressive house blessing" for our five families at the Windcrest Senior Residence—and we're leading monthly services which are attracting their neighbors as well.

The vineyard of St. Timothy's also represents the richness of our relationship with God. Ultimately, what matters most is not the success of our programs but our faithfulness in following Jesus Christ. Along with the blessings of being the beloved children of God come the responsibilities of building up and caring for God's household. It's the gifts of your time, talent, and treasure which bring energy into our worship, provide our welcoming atmosphere, and support the ministries of our staff. Our ability to reach out into the community depends on the strength of this foundation and our commitment to service.

We have a wonderful Stewardship committee, which has been working for months to plan the nuts 'n bolts of this fall campaign: "Building our Foundation, Securing our Commitment." During the summer they planned last Sunday's coffee hours and worked on the letter and pledge card which were mailed a week ago. But doesn't God have an amazing sense of humor? After all that careful planning, you received the Stewardship letter on the worst day in the history of the New York Stock Exchange. More than a trillion dollars of wealth were lost last Monday, and people have been swept away by a sense of scarcity and anxiety.

There's God tapping us on the shoulder, patiently reminding us of the limits of our best-laid plans. What can be learned from these recent experiences? We all need to be prudent in providing for our families, but when the institutions around us seem insecure, where can we put our trust? As Christians we affirm a deeper foundation, a secure place to stand in the abundance of God's kingdom.

When times get tough, what blessings can we truly count on? It's hard to know whether to begin by speaking of our families or our faith in God, but we don't have to choose. St. Timothy's is the place where the two come together, a family of faith loved by our creator, nurtured and watched over by our Savior Jesus Christ. When we encounter bumps in the road we're able to draw on the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. As Paul said in his letter to the Romans, "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Romans 8:31)

I learned something interesting about aspens recently. In a sense they're not really trees at all, but are among the oldest and largest plant communities on the earth. Robert Stieve wrote that "a stand of aspens is really a single organism where the main life force is underground. Think of aspens as enormous one- to 20-acre root systems that remain hidden until there's enough sunlight to make the roots sprout up white things called trunks, which then give birth to green things called leaves." (*Arizona Highways, July 2008*) These individual root systems can have astonishing life spans—scientists estimate that one in central Utah is 80,000 years old, making the giant sequoias of the Sierra Nevada look like newborns.

Discoveries like that magnify my sense of wonder and awe at being part of such an amazing world. The glorious fall colors in the mountains are only the surface of God's creative work. Deep underneath lies their foundation, nurturing the growth which we can see.

Think of St. Timothy's as an aspen grove. The source of our strength can be found in the heart and hands of the Creator who loves us, who formed us as a holy people. Our wealth can be measured in terms of the blessings we've received and the gifts we have to give, none of which are negated by the vicissitudes of the world around us. Like an ancient grove of trees we are rooted in God and deeply interconnected with one another.

Stewardship means making the best use of our gifts, so that when we are judged by our fruitfulness we can offer the good grapes which make delicious wine.

Signing a pledge card is a way of saying, "My loved ones and I belong to God and to this family of faith."

St. Timothy's is a place and a people lovingly shaped, provided with all that is necessary for a fruitful harvest, watched over day and night by our creator.

Thanks be to God.