



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Tending the Vine
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 14, 2022
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

In 1986, Tom Matthews and his girlfriend Sara decided to uproot their lives. Tom is a writer and Sara is a photographer. They were fascinated with French wine and wanted to explore life in France. So, they sublet their Manhattan apartment, purchased one-way tickets to France, and bought a twelve-year old Renault for \$850. They searched for an affordable place to live in a rural winegrowing area. They found a presbytere, the former home of a priest, in Ruch, a small village in the Bordeaux region. Tom wanted to learn all he could about the art of wine-making from the ground up.

He wanted to learn about the famed terroir of the French grapes – how they take on the particular flavors and characteristics of the conditions in which they grow. Geography, soil type, the previous crops grown on the land, the weather in a given year, the age of the vines, and countless other factors all affect the size, flavor, and aroma of the grapes and the wines made from them. What Tom discovered was another primary element, perhaps *the* primary element, in creating the terroir of the wine were the profoundly distinct characters, the people, who tended the vines.

He went out to pick grapes one day with Jeanette, an elderly woman with a young, mischievous grin, who, despite her age and diminutive stature, could out-pick Tom four bunches to one. After a while, Tom's back began to hurt. Jeanette said to him, "It's hard on the back. But you get used to it." Tom asked, "How long does that take?" Jeanette replied, "Well, I've picked grapes for over forty years, and sometimes my back still hurts. Tom said, "I can't wait that long," as he dropped to work on his knees. Jeanette cackled, "Oh, you learn to wait if you have to."

As they snipped grapes, Tom said "Forty years. That's a lot of grapes. Do you remember any harvests in particular?" Without hesitation, Jeanette replied, "1956. That year the winter frosts killed so many vines we finished picking grapes in a single week. All those dead vines were terrible to see. She shook her head, "Terrible."

Psalm 80, which we prayed (chanted) a few minutes ago, was written in a terrible time like that 1956 winter frost. The Psalm uses a vine as a metaphor for the Hebrew people. The vine was born in the shackles of slavery in Egypt. Nations were driven out, and the vine was planted in the promised land. Those nations that were driven out are a part of the story, a vital part of the terroir of the vine. Much like the terroir of this land is saturated by the Trail of Tears of our

indigenous peoples, and by the blood and sweat of those who were bought and sold as slaves here.

Over time, the vine of the Hebrew people grew and stretched out from the mountains to the sea. But now, it has been trampled upon by wild animals, metaphors for the enemy nations who had broken down its defenses and scoured its land. The Psalmist expressed the deepest longing of the people in their time of distress. They felt God had abandoned them. They desperately cried out, "Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven, and see, have regard for this vine." And they continually prayed in the refrain of the Psalm, "Restore us, O God of hosts, show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved." The people longed for God to once again tend the vine. Perhaps they and we are also learning that we have a sacred responsibility to do everything we can to help God tend the vine.

After their year in the vineyards, Tom wrote a book about their time in Ruch, entitled *A Village in the Vineyards*. Sara provided the photographs. What is striking about the stories and photos from that year are not the winemaking equipment and processes. but the deeply caring characters and the chiseled faces of each person who tended the vines. What is most resonant in the book is how Tom and Sara were touched by their hospitality and the many ways the people of Ruch tended to them and to each other throughout that year.

After their year in France, Tom and Sara got married. They returned to New York, where Tom later became executive editor of Wine Spectator magazine. Sara has published several books of her photography, highlighting the people and vineyards of wine-growing regions throughout the world. Throughout all their many accomplishments, they approach their life and work with the same humility that they learned and lived out during that year in Ruch.

I got to meet them when mentored as a seminary associate by Tom's stepfather, Reverend Kerm Morrison, at a little church in an old Italian neighborhood on the east side of New Haven, Connecticut. Tom volunteered to be a lay reader of scriptures on his frequent visits to the church. He also offered to host wine-tasting events as fund-raisers for the retirement home where Kerm and Tom's mother Susie eventually moved.

A few years ago, Ruthie and I went back to New Haven where I officiated a wedding. We contacted Tom to see if it would be alright if we went by and visited Kerm, who was suffering from dementia. Tom said not only would it be OK, we were coming on a weekend that he would be there with the man he called Dad. We arranged to meet Tom at Kerm's room. Ruthie gave Kerm a kiss on the cheek and called him "Kermie Baby" as she had done years before like Miss Piggy did with Kermit the Frog. This seemed to spark something in Kerm's memory and he laughed and smiled.

What I remember most about that visit is the tender way Tom spoke to Kerm and the gentle way he stroked his father's forehead. Two months later Tom contacted us to let us know Kerm had died. We would not trade anything for that hour of being with Kerm and Tom - one last hour to say goodbye to our beloved Kerm, one last hour to bear witness to love and tenderness.

One writer reflects on our crying out to God in Psalm 80 this way: "At the heart of a believer's rage is longing. In the end, we may not yearn so much for a rational explanation, as we yearn for

tenderness, the healing touch of balm for all the gaping wounds that alienate us from our own humanity and divine delight”

Toward the end of the day when Tom and Jeanette picked grapes together, he asked her if she remembered an especially good year. Surprisingly, she did not look back to a year in the past. Instead, Jeanette said, “This year’s not bad. A very big crop.”

Jeanette reminds Tom and us that there is much to be grateful for in the present. The same God who carried her through the losses of the 1956 winter frost is present in times of abundance. And any time of loss is part of our terroir and gives us a humble appreciation and gratitude for whatever gifts we receive and for whatever gifts we have to offer. Yes, we find God when we cry out. But we find God most every time we join in tending the vine with little touches of tenderness. *Amen.*