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The table has been set. The food is cooking. Your guests begin to arrive on Thanksgiving Day. You've spent a lot of time preparing the menu for this day, inviting your family or friends to bring certain items for the meal. As the final guest arrives, you invite everyone to the table. The guests comment on the table decorations, complete with turkey-shaped napkins and a matching centerpiece. As you sit at the table, you notice a bowl on the far side of the table that you had not placed there, filled with some small objects that you can't quite see. Before you have a chance to investigate, someone offers a prayer for the meal, and soon the food begins to pass around the table. The meal seems to be going without a hitch until someone says, "Where did you get these scrawny little grapes? They are the smallest things I've ever seen."

Suddenly you realize your guest is eating from the mysterious bowl that you had not placed on the table and had not requested anyone to bring. "I'm not sure where those came from," you confess. "I don't know how they got on my table or who

brought them. I don't even know if they're safe to eat, for I've never seen them before. They just appeared on the table, an invasion of food from some unknown origin."

A meek voice from across the table interjects, "I brought them from my garden." Your mysterious guest continues to explain, "I planted a few grape vines in my backyard several years ago. For the first year or two, I pruned them back so the plants would get stronger. Soon the vines began to spread in my garden, and I built trellises for them to climb. When the vines began to produce, I'm not sure what exactly happened, but I began to notice smaller grapes among the larger ones. I think maybe some birds deposited seeds from wild grapes. The wild grape vines began to take over the garden, climbing up the trellis and blocking out the light, killing off the grape vines I had planted. Now all I have left are these small wild grapes."

Silence surrounds the table as guests listen to the story of the wild grapes, with everyone

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wondering, “Why did those wild grapes show up at our dinner?”

That’s a similar question that the prophet Isaiah pondered 2800 years ago as he told the parable of the vineyard. In his telling of the story, God had cleared the stones from the land and planted choice grape vines, along with a watchtower in the middle of the vineyard. Instead of luscious tasty grapes, wild grapes invaded the garden. The owner of the vineyard pondered, “How did those grapes show up in my vineyard?” We can almost hear the voice of frustration as God asked, “What more could I have done for the vineyard that I have not already done? Why did it yield wild grapes instead of the ones I planted?”

As Isaiah looked around him and saw how people were treating one another, he sensed God’s frustration with them. The rich were becoming wealthier while the poor were suffering. Those in power ignored the cries of their fellow citizens who were suffering.

The prophet Isaiah knew that something had to change, and in the parable of the vineyard, he envisioned what could happen: the hedge around the garden could be torn down. The walls might crumble. Briars and thorns could invade the vineyard, choking out any growth. In other words, those in power could be turned upside down as God reached out to those who were oppressed.

As I read these words from Isaiah, I recalled hearing this imagery of the vineyard used this past summer at the General Assembly, an event where Disciples of Christ gather together every two years. Our General Minister and President, Terri Hord Owens, spoke about what’s involved in growing grape vines.

She first noted that grape vines cannot grow alone. They must be planted in pairs in order to pollinate one another. In a similar manner, we need one another in order to grow. I’ve heard people tell me they can worship God alone at home, and while that may be true, the fruit of the vine won’t grow as strong in isolation, for wild grapes are always less

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developed. It's through church community that our faith and understanding grow deeper roots in the soil of faith and bear healthier fruit.

Secondly, Owens noted that vines need structure, for without a trellis the vines will grow all over the place and block out all the light, choking out vitality and growth. In a similar way, the church provides a structure for faith formation, a place to ask questions and study through Sunday school, Bible study, and other small groups. It's through our study of scripture that we become grounded in our faith. Owens noted that it's not through a dogmatic use of the Bible, but through an interpretation that's inclusive and reflects the loving nature of God. It's by teaching our children and one another to think theological and ask questions that our roots grow deeper into the soil of faith.

Thirdly, she noted the importance of prayer, for without our connection to God, we dry up. Those who dry up begin to hurt one another, just as dried flowers are prickly and hurt those who come into contact with them. You've probably encountered

those prickly people who spread pain and anger wherever they go.

Being part of the church won't solve all the difficult parts of life, but it's through our community of faith, study, and prayer that we support one another, just as a trellis supports the vines growing upon it.

Occasionally we may even find a few wild grapes in the church, such as those who often disagree with every new idea. They may argue just for the sake of argument, or they may strive to maintain control and get their own way.

Isaiah was also aware of the wild grapes growing around him, but he still offered God's people hope, for in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter he changes his metaphor to another plant—a new growth coming out of the stump of a tree, with new branches sprouting forth. The prophet envisioned someone with God's Spirit advocating for the poor and bringing wisdom and knowledge to the world.

When those in the early church experienced the teachings of Jesus 800 years after Isaiah spoke

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these words about new growth sprouting, they applied the words to Jesus, celebrating that he was the One filled with God's Spirit and wisdom. They gave thanks that God continued to bring them hope, and that even when life was difficult and seemed confusing, God remained with them, offering guidance and courage.

Sometimes it's hard to give thanks, for life is not always easy, and often we encounter times that feel like wild grapes. Sometimes random events enter our lives and create chaos, situations that make our life more difficult. One woman, however, found a way to give thanks even when life was difficult:

She was always able to find something for which she was thankful. One morning there was a terrible snowstorm, but she still showed up in time for work, and she was thankful. Her supervisor was surprised to see her, and was equally surprised to hear that she was thankful to make it to work in such a storm.

When asked why she was so thankful, she said that she was thankful that she lived so close to work. Her supervisor still did not understand how she could even walk on the icy sidewalks with the blowing winds. She said that she was so thankful that she was able to crawl to work on her hands and knees. Her supervisor was astounded, and asked what was so wonderful about crawling to work on her hands and knees. The woman smiled and said, "During the blizzard in the early morning light, no one was able to see me!"<sup>1</sup>

In the coming weeks as you prepare to gather at the table with friends or family, or as you serve or attend the community Thanksgiving meal on Wednesday evening here at our church, or even if you gather in a shelter with others seeking a warm place, you may encounter a few wild grapes in random situations or through encounters with others. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving, for even in times of wild grapes, you remain in God's care.

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*for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 4552-4558). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #933.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgins, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations*