

COMMON GROUND, SOLID GROUND  
Oregon/Washington District Conference  
Olympic View Church of the Brethren  
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Matthew 21:28-32:

<sup>28</sup> "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup> He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?" They [the chief priests and the elders of the people] said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Yesterday, even while we were meeting and singing and praying through our yearly District Conference, it was also the national Day of Action for the emerging Green Jobs Now movement.

Concerned citizens gathered at about 500 events nationwide to let their elected officials know that they are ready for us to commit as a nation to a new, *green* economy. Neighbors gathered to plant gardens, Sunday school groups signed petitions, parents held press conferences at their children's preschools, groups marched on their town halls to say "We're ready." Organizers described it as "a day of action to show Congress, the next President, and the Nation we want an inclusive green economy, strong enough to lift people out of poverty *and* solve the climate crisis."

The teachers, lawyers, construction workers, artists, nurses, parents, union organizers, politicians, and other activists who make up this movement are demanding these green jobs, this green economy, because they see it as the most solid, most sustainable way to address the problems facing their communities— and ours. We need to rehabilitate ourselves from addiction to oil, and from lifestyles that treat God's good Creation like a personal plaything. We also need to end poverty, here and around the world, to see all God's people as our sisters and brothers (in part through jobs that can't be outsourced). Green jobs would help meet both of those needs, they believe.

These folks have signed a petition declaring that "We can't drill and burn our way out of the current crisis. We can invest and invent our way out. We can create new pathways out of poverty and curb global warming at the same time. We will do this by retooling our factories, rebuilding our communities, and re-powering America with 100% clean and renewable electricity."

What will this look like? It will look like people working their way out of poverty through jobs attaching solar panels to schools and churches. Like local

communities instituting “Green Economic Development Plans” that provide incentives for green businesses. Like converting the ports of Oakland and other cities to use biodiesel. Like developers constructing ecologically-sound buildings on once-toxic land, employing the labor of formerly incarcerated workers. It would look like encouraging economies that value the ‘green’ associated with helping the planet instead of just the ‘green’ of dollar bills. “An inclusive green economy, strong enough to lift people out of poverty *and* solve the climate crisis.”

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It seems to me that a great theme for this new green jobs movement would be the theme we’ve been exploring in our District Conference: “Common Ground, Solid Ground.” This movement is all about people coming together, finding common ground in places they’d never looked before. Environmentalists and anti-poverty activists have come together even though they *could* have stayed working on their issues separately. Instead, this movement is looking for *one* solution that can address the many problems diverse campaigns need.

One of the leaders of this Green Jobs Now campaign is Van Jones, one of the most articulate, creative voices in the environmental justice movement today. He described the impetus for this Day of Action in this way: “if you’re one of the people who’s got a job and can afford \$5 gas, you’re probably worried about the survival of the planet. But if you’re one of the people who’s living in poverty, you’re just worried about survival, period. The [day after the first presidential debate], [the candidates] are going to learn that for the first time, *these* [two groups of] people have gotten together to demand the same thing: green jobs, to lift millions of people out of poverty *and* beat global warming.” In this movement, people are choosing to stand on new common ground.

A ‘funny’ thing is that on the other side of that choice is a different kind of common ground. One of the songs Mike Stern played last night, one he’d written for this conference, was called “Higher Ground.” And it occurred to me that those of us in this green jobs movement are doing so in part because of this global climate crisis that will, in fact, *force* us to find ‘common’ ground, because it’s the only space we can find when we look for rapidly shrinking *higher* ground. Climate change will be causing the sea levels to rise and causing displacement for more and more of the world’s people too impoverished to cope with what’s happened because of other people’s choices. But that ground isn’t as solid as the common ground we could choose. We can choose common ground today – or have it chosen for us if we wait.

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Now, in the face of all this, Jesus has a pretty challenging message for us.

In our gospel reading for today, we overhear him telling an interesting parable about two sons. Dad goes up to one son and asks him to go work in the family vineyard, to which he replies, “Aw, come on, Dad. I don’t want to.” But later on, he reconsiders and heads out to work. Dad goes to the other son and asks him to go work in the vineyard. This son says, “No problem, Dad, I’m on my

way.” But then he sits around and never ends up getting out there. Now, which of these sons did what their father wanted? It’s the one who actually got out and did the work. The one who got out and took care of the vineyard, even if he didn’t say he would. Getting the vineyard taken care of is dad’s bottom line.

So what might Jesus be saying to us here? I think Jesus does recognize that intentions *are* important, and good intentions are often part of the process of making something good happen. But what matters *more* than the right words or saying the right things to the right people is what we get done; what matters is the fruits of our labors; what matters is taking care of the vineyard.

The challenging thing for us is that, if we look around us today, often the ones taking care of the vineyard – this vineyard here on Earth, this inheritance we have from God - they are not all Christians, not the ones who are just talking about the good *news*, but the ones doing the good *work* of caring for God’s Creation and God’s people.

Part of the reason I’m Brethren is that I think we ‘get it’ more than many and we *are* out taking care of the vineyard: selling fair trade gifts, getting money and volunteers out to do the tedious work of rebuilding months after natural disasters, helping feed the hungry, counseling young people to follow their consciences - and often working outside our own church structures to get this all done. But Jesus’ message still stands to remind us that we have to keep focusing on the fruit. It’s no coincidence that a bunch of grapes are at the center of the seal designed by Alexander Mack, a founder of our Church of the Brethren. The bottom line is caring for the vineyard.

There’s two main ways this passage speaks to us to guide how we consider the green jobs movement, and how our work as Christians fits in. On one level, it’s what they’re doing that’s the lesson for us: these activists are the ones out there taking care of the vineyard, sometimes “following Christ” better than people who call themselves Christians, even if they aren’t using the same structures or organizations or language as us. While this may sting our egos a bit, it really is good news for us, because it means we don’t have to shoulder all this work alone. We as Christians need to find common ground with these folks to get the fruit harvested.

On another level, this movement is a model for us in how they’re taking care of the vineyard: *by working on common ground*, something we’ve been practicing this weekend.

- They’re setting an example of a way to come together across traditional alliances and histories and organizational policies, to get more done by working together.

- They’re showing us how rooting ourselves in common ground requires accepting new perspectives, new horizons. For example, environmentalists like myself will have to overcome their spontaneous shudder at the idea of *business* being part of the solution to environmental problems. Similarly, anti-poverty activists will have to revise their approach, to realize that people will not be helped without understanding them within their environmental contexts. To find common ground in a world with needs that are always changing, we often have to let go of some of our territoriality to rebuild our foundations in new places.

- They're modeling for us how to translate their languages to be able to communicate with each other.
- They're demonstrating that while each of us has our own valuable story, we can also write a new story together.
- They're showing how ground that has been *good* before becomes *great* when shared, and, even though they might not say it this way, that God's justice-love is not divided when shared, but rather, multiplied. It's easy to see that there a lots of good steps you and I can take as individuals to conserve energy: use CFL bulbs, take shorter showers, drive less, turn off the lights. But if we can't come together as a nation and as a planetary community and create the systems to undergird an economy relying on new forms of energy, our good, individual steps won't be good enough.

Most importantly, this movement is revealing a radical notion in the cultivation of common ground, radical in that it goes to the root of it all: it's that the common ground we share will be most solid, most sustainable, when we come together not out of a sense of guilt, not even out of unity for unity's sake, but out of our deep, intrinsic need for each other - out of our inability to survive or sustain our work without each other. We need each other, we need to find our common ground, because we have one Creator and one earthly Creation.

Unemployed dock workers need to learn new skills; people coming out of prison need rewarding work that pays a fair wage; our children need clean air to breathe; our sisters and brothers around the globe need homes that won't be submerged under water; our industries need lasting energy; the forests and oceans and all of non-human nature need to survive... and none of this will happen alone, without concentrated effort to tackle the deeper problems beneath.

The urgency for this green jobs movement is even greater in the wake of the collapses on Wall Street over the past few weeks, and their painful trickle-down effects on real people behind the numbers. We are seeing that the way we've been running our economy is not working for working people. It hasn't been working for the planet for some time. Our nation is reassessing the way its economy operates. The Green Jobs movement is offering one idea for rebuilding part of this economy.

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We as Christians are called to enter into these conversations in a wholly new way – by bringing word of the solid ground that needs to undergird all of our economies: God's faithful love. Christians much help foster alternative economies, that read value not in dollar signs but in life and in community and in love – in peace, in simplicity, in togetherness. This is where Christians, especially Church of the Brethren Christians, need to come in: to help the environmentalists and the anti-poverty activists recognize their common need: a deep look at how resources are distributed in this world, a fundamental shift in the ways we approach economics, "a true revolution of values," as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said. We known that changing the forms of the economy won't be enough, until we change the values behind it, until we invert the system and

allow people to use the economy for their benefit, instead of people and the planet being used for the benefit of the economy. We can help this green jobs movement develop its focus on alternative, Sabbath economies, fruit-centered economics, vineyard-centered economics.

But to do that, we in the church will first have to take a lesson from this green jobs movement and others like it, to get beyond our usual divisions, get beyond testing for the right creed or credentials to get involved, get on to the work of hospitality, get on to welcoming all people willing to get out in God's vineyard and work on our common ground. Common or not, *ground* is useful because that's where we plant seeds of what grows and gives life.

What I believe most deeply is that the world truly cries out for the healing Christian voices, Christian hands, Christian minds can bring. That is what we're called to. There's a big world that needs us, that desperately needs the revolutionary Christian story and our stories to be woven into the stories of the world. We Christians are called to find common ground with each other in the church because we are needed for a greater purpose: to build common ground with people outside the church and around the world who are taking care of the vineyard.

Just imagine how much more those brothers could have gotten done if the second one had gotten up and said, "Come on, brother, I told Dad we'd work in the vineyard, so let's get out there. It's not always a blast, but it will be more fun if you come with me." The other brother might say, "Yeah, you're right. Hey, let's try out some of that new, nontoxic fertilizer I heard the neighbors mention..."

Talk about green jobs! This movement really isn't new at all – it's been around ever since Jesus called on us to get out in the vineyard.

May the harvest be plentiful, the workers many, and the ground solid, fertile, well-loved. Amen.