

Epworth Chapel on the Green

October 5, 2014
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80:7-14
Philippians 3:14-21
Matthew 21:33-43

Our Scripture lessons this morning focus on the theme of the vineyard, which is a very prominent theme in the Scriptures. Throughout the Old Testament, the image of the children of Israel as God's vineyard was a chief symbol of everything connected with the covenant.

And in fact the Psalm writer says in Psalm 80 that Israel was a vine "transplanted from Egypt," a vine which had taken root and grown so large that its shadows covered the mountains and the great cedars of Lebanon. Unfortunately, however, the fruit produced is not what God envisioned, at least as Isaiah tells the story.

Isaiah shows this in a series of word twists, or plays on words. He says that God expected "justice" from His vineyard but instead got "bloodshed." The Hebrew term for "justice" is *mishpat*. The Hebrew term for "bloodshed" is *mispah*. God expected *mishpat*, but got *mispah*.

Isaiah also says that God expected “righteousness,” but instead got “a cry.” The Hebrew term for “righteousness” is *sedeqah*, while the term for “a cry” is *seaqah*. God expected *sedeqah*, and got *seaqah*.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus draws on the image of Isaiah 5 to speak once again of Israel as God’s vineyard. He tells a parable to the Pharisees and religious leaders, whose opposition to his ministry has been strengthening strongly to this point in Matthew's Gospel

The story is about a landowner who hires tenant farmers to tend his vineyard, and who treat his servants (and eventually his son) with violence and hostility at harvest time. Near the end of the story, Jesus tells the religious leaders that the kingdom of God will be taken *from them* and given to those who will produce proper fruit.

The Church through the centuries has typically interpreted Jesus' words here as referring to Israel. The story describes how the children of Israel rejected and murdered many of the prophets who were sent to them, rejected Jesus as the Messiah, and eventually suffered the destruction of Jerusalem and subsequent mission of the Apostle Paul to invite the Gentiles to the party.

This Gospel parable is not a favorite of mine, because there doesn't seem to be much "Good News" or "Gospel" in it. The message seems to be: *God is*

looking for an obedient people, a people eager to do His will in the world, and if we won't do it, God will find someone else who will.

Martin Luther once said that some biblical texts have to be squeezed very tightly before any Gospel or "Good News" leaks out. This parable is, for me, one such text. So if you'll permit me, I'd like to take this text and put it between my hands like a wet dishcloth, and wring it until some truly "Good News" leaks out.

In order to hear this parable fully, we must remember what was occurring in Palestine at the time Jesus told it.

Remember that the Romans were occupying the land, and that most of the farmland in Galilee was controlled by foreign owners. They would make minimal investments in the property and try to maximize their return.

During the reign of King Herod the Great, crop surpluses were common but most of the food was *exported*, and Palestine itself experienced regular food shortages. The shortage of food drove up prices. This economic stress -- combined with the high taxes imposed by Rome and Jerusalem -- drove many poor people into servitude, where they would sell themselves in order to provide food for their families.

Tenant farmers had some freedom, but didn't fare much better. They would rent the land from these absentee landlords, work long hours for long seasons, and return the lion's share of the profit to the foreign owner. Most of the time they

were barely able to keep their families alive. And Pilate and the powers that be were ruthless in suppressing rebellion or challenging the status quo.

So here is what you have. You have abundant crops, food shortages, and absentee landlords in an oppressive system. And into this situation Jesus comes and tells a story about a group of tenant farmers who get fed up and take matters into their own hands.

How do you think Jesus' hearers felt about a story like this? How would you feel if it were you? Who would *you* be rooting for?

Most people listening to Jesus would have rooted for the tenant farmers. The death of a few landlords, or their kin, would not cause any tears in Galilee.

But those listening to Jesus also would completely understand the answer to Jesus' question about what would happen to the tenant farmers. Experiencing a horrible death at the hands of an angry landowner was not just a theoretical end to a story. *This was what happened to tenant farmers who rebelled.* Those listening to Jesus knew this all too well, and they likely knew of cases where it had actually happened.

But there are additional items in this story that make me wonder about the owner of the vineyard. Not only is he an absentee landlord, but it would appear that he lacks compassion, common sense, or both.

He appears to lack compassion and common sense when he sends a second group of servants back to the vineyard after the group he initially sends is beaten and stoned.

And he appears to lack *any* common sense when, after the second group of servants meets with violence, he sends his son. Talk about naive! Does he not “get it?” Does he not see that force must be met with force, especially when the stakes are high and vested interests are being protected?

I read this and I say to myself: What is this landowner doing sending his son? What is he thinking? Does he have no common sense? Does he not know what will happen?

Apparently not. He sends his son to a violent and cruel death.

Surely I’m not the only one who reads this and says, “You could see this coming from a mile away!” Is the landowner the only one who couldn’t see this coming? I mean, I hate to say “I told you so,” but ----- I told you so!

Do you remember what we’ve said in the past about parables? Jesus tells these earthy stories from real life and draws listeners into the story, but at some point in the story there is usually a “gotcha” moment -- a moment where the world as they see it is challenged or turned upside down, and they are introduced to the world as it is in God’s way of doing things.

So we might ask ourselves: Where is the "gotcha" moment in this parable?

Well, consider this. Consider the vineyard owner. He is....

- * the absentee landlord in an oppressive system
- * the guy we love to hate
- * the guy who seems to lack compassion
- * the guy who seems to lack common sense --

And He is God!

So where does the bright idea come from to send his son, his heir, alone, to deal and negotiate with these bloodthirsty hooligans? It's absolutely crazy. Who would do such a thing?

No one. Except perhaps a crazy landlord so desperate to be in relationship with these tenants that he will do anything, risk anything, to reach out of them.

This landowner acts more like a desperate parent than a ruthless landlord. This is more the behavior of a parent willing to do or say or try anything to reach out to a beloved and wayward child than it is of a businessman. It's crazy, the kind of crazy that comes from being in love.

Conventional human wisdom would dictate that when the landowner's servants are beaten and murdered, he would take drastic action and send an army in to annihilate the upstart tenant farmers in a real display of shock and awe.

But that view of God is a view that tames God down and fits God into our human ways of seeing and doing. And that view of God is simply too small. For in this case, *God's ultimate display of shock and awe is a Son who is sent as an act*

of suffering love. It turns out that the landowner is not naive, nor does he lack compassion or common sense. It's just that his wisdom surpasses ours, and the boundaries of his mercy are so wide as to be almost incalculable to us.

However we understand this parable, there is one thing we should not do. We should not read this story and view it as a license to dance on the grave of those who have lost their tenancy over the vineyard (i.e., Israel). Rather, we should understand clearly that unless the new tenants bear fruit, the vineyard may be transferred yet again.

So, in my attempt to wring some Gospel from this text we have perhaps come full circle. Back to the lesson that if we are not faithful to what God calls us to do, God will find someone else to do it. True enough. *But the judgment that befalls us when we become unfaithful stewards is not what we deserve, but rather an open tombstone that reminds us of a new thing God is doing.* And in a world gone mad with power, this truly is wonderful to see.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.