

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 8, 2017
Eighteenth 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.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus returns to the Old Testament symbol of the vineyard to teach about Israel, the Church, and the Kingdom of God. And the symbolism of both Isaiah and the Psalmist is readily understood.

God is the owner and the house of Israel is the vineyard. A cherished vine, Israel was plucked from Egypt and transplanted in a fertile land specially spaded and prepared by God, hedged about by the city walls of Jerusalem, watched over by the towering temple.

But the vineyard produced no good grapes for the wine, a symbol for the holy lives God wanted for His people. So God allowed His vineyard to be overrun by foreign invaders, as Isaiah anticipates in our Old Testament lesson.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus draws on the image of Isaiah 5 to speak once again of Israel as God's vineyard, even using Isaiah's words to describe the vineyard's wine press, hedge, and watchtower. Israel's religious leaders – the tenants in the parable – have learned nothing from Isaiah or Israel's past. Instead of producing good fruits, they've killed the owner's servants, the prophets sent to gather the harvest of faithful souls.

Then, in a dark foreshadowing of his own crucifixion outside Jerusalem, Jesus says that the tenants' final outrage will be to seize the owner's son, and to kill him outside the vineyard walls.

Because of this, the vineyard, which Jesus calls the Kingdom of God, will be taken away and given to new tenants – the leaders of the Church -- who will produce its fruit.

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?

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.

As we prepare to come to the Table, we are reminded by these stories this morning that if we are not faithful to what God calls us to do, God will find someone else to do it. True enough. But these tangible symbols of bread and wine this morning also show us that *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 Father's love and mercy that are indescribable.*

We come to the Table today reminded that we are each a vine in the Lord's vineyard, grafted onto the true vine of Christ, called to bear fruit in him and to be the "first fruits" of a new creation. We are called, in the words of our epistle, to fill our hearts and minds with noble intentions and virtuous deeds, and to rejoice always that the Lord is near.

So come with faith. Receive the grace he offers you, so that you may abide in him and he in you. And by his grace, we shall be his fruitful vineyard in our little corner of the world.

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