

Sunday, October 8, 2023
Isaiah 5:1-7, Matthew 21:33-46
"Those Wicked Tenants"
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

Do you remember in June of this year, smelling and seeing the smoke from the wildfires in Canada? Due to a very mild winter with little snowfall and a record high heat in the spring, over 400 wildfires began they think from lightning, and at one time over 200 of them were out of control. If you looked very closely, you would have seen sparks of flames going from tree to tree and watching them, just explode with fire! Have you ever been part of an argument or a demonstration that started small and the anger kept growing and growing? Escalating to the point of exploding anger? I want you to try to place yourself among the chief priests and the pharisees, those church leaders of Jesus' time. They had watched slowly before their eyes this man Jesus becoming more and more popular, all the while doing more and more questionable things in their eyes. Eating with people you just weren't supposed to, healing those you just weren't supposed to even be around, preaching absurd things about loving one's enemies. It slowly got worse and worse as more and more people began to follow him. Three years of this and then he enters the Temple overturns the tables of the money changers, creating a whip to chase everyone out and that's where we are in our story today. This conflict has just reached epic proportions. They are now actively preparing to kill Jesus. Actively making a plan. And Jesus knows this, and yet he keeps trying and trying to explain about God's kingdom on earth. And that is why the parable of last week was pretty harsh, but this week – whoa.

Let me try to explain this parable of those wicked, wicked tenants. Since the very beginning of time – maybe with Adam and Eve - our job has been to care for God's vineyard. The original tenants or renters of the vineyard by the time of the Old Testament were the Jews, and in this gospel, it is those early followers of Jesus. Recall last Sunday, the chief priests and scribes were questioning Jesus' authority and Jesus answers that what is more important is not who has the authority or by whose authority one does things but whether one does the will of God, living God's kingdom on earth. And he tells the parable of the two sons, explaining why doing the will of God, following the path of Christ, is more important than knowing who gave one special authority.

Here Jesus uses a metaphor which comes from the passage in Isaiah, but the prophet Isaiah uses the vineyard to refer to the house of Israel and the people of Judah. However, the Isaiah passage is almost like a love song. Where God is gracious and a generous vineyard keeper who planted choice vines in his garden, looked after them, caused them to prosper and expected them to flourish. Israel was to flourish but didn't. After all that careful planning and generous care, the vineyard failed. The vineyard yielded not good grapes but wild grapes, whatever that is. And this greatly disappointed the Vineyard keeper.

I don't know a whole lot about vineyards, do you? There actually is one at the end of my road and we visited it, tasted all of their wines, and every one actually tasted quite awful. We bought a bottle because we felt bad after testing all their wine but made Sangria with lots and lots of fruit.

I don't know a lot about growing grapes but as you know, I certainly know the struggles of tending to a garden and being pleased in some ways and disappointed in many others. Have

you read the book by William Anderson entitled, *The \$64 Tomato: How One Man Nearly Lost His Sanity, Spent a Fortune, and Endured an Existential Crisis in the Quest for the Perfect Garden?* It's a good read. Right now my garden is full of voles, moles, whatever you call them, who eat the grubs, who eat my vines, it's so frustrating. Its why at the end of the growing season I have lots of gourds, they must hate those, and only a few pumpkins. They must love those. I can get so frustrated.

God is frustrated here too in this passage from the prophet Isaiah. What kind of harvest did God want? Well, Isaiah tells us, justice and righteousness, not bloodshed and a cry of distress. The passage goes on to speak about the selfishness of the people who don't care for others, only themselves and what is best for their own personal gain. But God is in this for the long haul, God never gives up on his vineyard. Maybe I too am in this for the long haul. I won't give up on my garden and am pleased when I love what it does yield and so does God.

In today's parable from the Gospel of Matthew, the problem is not with the produce of the vineyard but the workers in the vineyard. These tenants who were supposed to tend to the vineyard, who had been hired by the landowner to care for the vineyard, somehow have come to mistake stewardship, care-taking, with ownership. So when the servants of the owner show up to collect what is due, the tenants beat, kill, and stone them. So the owner sends more servants, and they too are killed. Finally, the owner sends his own son, assuming they will respect him, but just the opposite is true, for the tenants think, they can gain all the inheritance by killing the son, so that's what they do.

And here we go with Jesus' craziness in these parables. So how on earth did the tenants come to think that they could inherit the vineyard? It's not like the landlord never returned, he sent servants, then more servants, then his own son! And kind of crazy too is the landlord – what kind of a strategy is it to send your son, the heir, all alone to meet this mob when they've pretty much proven how violent they are!

This is one of those passages where I say – Matthew seriously? This parable is actually in the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Mark, but no one is murdered or stoned or killed, just "treated poorly". I sometimes think Matthew watched too many horror movies! So much violence here, the violence of the tenants and the assumed and anticipated violence of the landlord! Recall Jesus question at the end to the chief priests and pharisees: "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants who beat, stoned or killed two sets of servants, and his own son and heir?" The Pharisees have no difficulty in answering: "he will put those wretches to a miserable death!" And you don't blame them, that's the way the world works. Violence begets violence.

But stop for a moment and put yourself in Matthew's shoes. Where is Matthew's narrative taking us? What is next? It is leading to the ultimate act of violence, the crucifixion. Of the innocent Son and heir. God sent prophets and more prophets, servants and more servants, who were all silenced, their message buried by these religious leaders. The pharisees wanted the vineyard all to themselves. They silenced all of God's representatives. And God has now sent God's son. And we know what is about to happen.

But what have we heard? God never gives up on his vineyard or on the tenants of that vineyard, no matter how horribly wicked they can or we can be. God sends prophets and more prophets. And as one pastor writes, the landowner will not seek violence against the tenants because in the cross of Jesus, God absorbs our violence and responds with life, with

resurrection, with Jesus triumphant over death and offering not retribution, but peace. Jesus does not return with vengeance, he doesn't kick anyone out of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus, having taken on the worst that our violence can inflict, comes back and instructs his disciples to take the good news of the Gospel to the very ends of the earth, promising to be with them always. That means, violence does not and will not have the last word. "That tragedy and death and loss and hatred are, in the end, no match for love and life and forgiveness and peace." (1) And while we continue to this day to see violence, so much violence; in the light of the resurrection, we also see hope and hope is the birthplace of faithful action, compassion and resolve. Hope is how we restore the vineyard.

And when Matthew states, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits." It is not to dismiss Isaiah's vision, but it is a moral challenge for us all to produce good grapes, good fruits. Remember the fruits of the spirit? Love, joy, peace, compassion, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. After those in authority take Jesus' life, there will be a change in management. The kingdom of God will be taken away from them, there is no vineyard for those chief priests and pharisees. It will be given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom.

Now before we start placing blame and shame on those wicked tenants, those wicked chief priests and pharisees in this parable, I ask, just how are we doing in our tending of God's Vineyard? We are all on lease from God to care for God's people, to care for God's creation, to care for the Kingdom of God on earth. How are we doing?

In the year of 1226, on October 3rd, St. Francis of Assisi died and October 4th became an important Festival Day to remember and celebrate this saint. St. Francis is remembered for his tremendous love of all of God's creatures, and for creation itself. St. Francis was also known for his great passion for the church and for the gospel and for bringing the church back to its main purpose of proclaiming the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ to all of God's children. He was particularly passionate in bringing that love to those that the world often forgot.

There are many stories about how he preached to the birds and they perched on him. One day, the story goes, he talked a wolf out of attacking people in his village. Did you know he gave up the wealth he had grown up with and lived a life of poverty? Did you know he created the first live nativity scene complete with a donkey and an ox in a cave in Italy? Well, we are no Saints, Francis or otherwise, but we are caretakers, tenants none the less. We must care for the world, the people of the world, even our enemies. As stewards of God's vineyard, we should not judge others or use them for our benefit but embrace all brothers and sisters.

The reason for this parable, is to remind us as well that our leadership has to be different from the outside world. Not just set apart for the work of the church but to show the world, to be an example to the world, that cares for the meek, works for righteousness, advocates for peace. Whenever I train Elders and Deacons to serve in a congregation, I tell them when they go out there, into the real world, they represent this congregation in every thing they do. With privilege comes responsibility. The kingdom comes with limitless grace, but also comes with limitless demand. It means being in this for the long haul.

In the end this is an indictment against the leaders of that time who couldn't seem to care for their own. However, we assume the disciples were also listening, so they too needed to be reminded of what leadership looks like. As one pastor writes, we do too, especially now when hypocrisy seems acceptable, even expectable and justice for all really means just for a few.

When I look at all of the leaders in this country, I sometimes wonder if they are faithfully serving, not themselves, but all those who have been put under their charge. And it is our job as followers of Christ, tenders of the vineyard, to call out leadership that is unjust, to uncover leadership that thinks only of itself, to expose leadership that lets people under their charge die senselessly. She states, "It is far too easy and too common to allow complacency to replace resistance; safety and security to replace decency and goodness; and silence to replace prophecy." (2)

Christianity is not a happiness cult that offers shallow peace of mind and winsome personalities. It is a call to strive to live what we say we believe. God gave God's only son. God gave us life. God has given us the vineyard. And expects us to be good tenants of it. To produce good fruit, love, kindness, compassion, justice, mercy. And that is hard work, for there are grubs out there, wicked tenants out there, who only want to take over the vineyard for themselves. We must be in this for the long haul, knowing we are never alone. Are you up for the challenge? May it be so, Amen.

- . (1) Lose, The Rev. David. Working Preacher. 10/6/1017.
- (2) Lewis, The Rev. Karoline. Working Preacher. 10/1/2017.