

October 8, 2017
Pentecost 18
Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46
When A Vineyard Is Not A Vineyard
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Grace to you and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A story about a vineyard is never JUST a story about a vineyard. Today we have an example of how the Revised Common Lectionary can tie together the threads of the long arc of the biblical narrative.

Three of the four texts speak of vineyards. The song of Isaiah tells of a good and pleasant vineyard gone bad, Psalm 80 recalls a lovely vineyard that was ultimately destroyed and the gospel text presents the story of tenant farmers intent on destroying their relationship with their landlord. But a story about a vineyard is never JUST a story about a vineyard. We've heard these vineyard stories so many times. I wonder what would it have been like to hear this parable for the first time?

Matthew wrote this gospel account of Jesus in the late first century CE, sometime between 80 and 90 CE, more than 50 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The writer did not know Jesus. The hearers did not know Jesus. The stories rely on received knowledge, just like we do. The gospel of Matthew is written in the midst of oppressive Roman occupation about events that took place under equally oppressive Roman occupation. The Roman Empire had seized control of Jerusalem, burned the temple to the ground and scattered or killed the people.

Rewind several thousand years to the times of Abraham and Moses, Elijah and Isaiah, and recall the long history of God's people, Israel. Remember that it is also OUR history.

God made covenants with Abraham and Moses for the benefit of God's chosen people, Israel. God faithfully kept these covenants. Covenants that the people of Israel broke with shameful regularity, covenants that we continue to break today.

The Ancient Middle East was an agrarian society dependent on individuals who owned multiple plots of land. They leased the land to tenants who managed the farms. The tenants hired laborers to harvest the vineyards.

But, a story about a vineyard is never JUST a story about a vineyard. In each of these three vineyard texts today something went terribly wrong.

The prophet Isaiah speaks at a time similar to the gospel writer's. Israel, beloved and favored by God has again fallen prey to the idolatrous practices of its neighboring nations and God is displeased. God speaks through Isaiah to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the people of Judah. God has done everything good and lovely for Israel expecting the people to respond with joy and praise. Instead, God says "my vineyard yielded wild grapes".

God, tells the people exactly what will happen. The vineyard will be exposed, devoured, made waste, overgrown and untended. Psalm 80 is the lament of the people of Israel after God follows through on the threat to devastate the vineyard. The Psalmist pleads to God for restoration and salvation.

These are the images that Jesus draws on for the telling of this parable. These are the images that the gospel writer draws on for the re-telling of Jesus' message. What does any of this have to do with us, today? Aside from being interesting historically, parables are a way for us to understand how we fit into salvation history. Parables give us a place of entry into our history. When you read a novel or hear a news story, do you find yourself identifying with one or another of the characters in the story? That's what a parable does, it introduces us to characters we can either identify with or reject.

Today's parable can be characterized as allegory. The vineyard, represents the people of Israel, God's people. The tenants are the religious leaders who teach and keep the laws and rituals of God's people. The fruit represents the acts of obedience that come from the people in response to God's faithful caring and nurturing. The slaves or laborers represent the prophets sent by God to remind the people of God's faithful caring and nurturing. The son obviously refers to Jesus Christ, the one who surely will be respected by those who meet him yet is murdered by the religious leaders who want to keep their power. Power that was never theirs to keep.

This is a story that foretells Jesus death at the hands of those who are unwilling to give up their power and privilege and prestige. But a story about a vineyard is never JUST a story about a vineyard.

What is the question Jesus asks the religious leaders? What should the landowner do to the tenants who threw the son out of the vineyard and murdered him? Their answer comes from their position of power, privilege and prestige. Put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will do what they are expected to do.

This exchange reminds me of the exchange between the prophet Nathan and King David. After David took Bathsheba and had her husband murdered in battle, Nathan told King David a parable about a rich man who took a poor man's only lamb for his dinner guests because he could, even though the rich man had an abundance of lambs. When asked what he would do to the rich man, David was adamant that the rich man should die and repay the poor man four times the loss.

David called for harsh judgment against the rich man, just as the religious leaders call for harsh judgment against the murdering tenants. Do you remember the prophet's response? The evil one is you.

How we judge the characters in a story is the mirror by which we also are judged. Who are you in this story? Are you the landowner, entrusting your land to renters? Are you entrusted to tend the vineyard, to keep God's covenant? Are you the slaves who harvest the fruit, abused and beaten? How do you judge the characters in the story? The landowner, the tenants, the laborers? How do you judge the religious leaders as they hear and respond to this parable?

Just when we think we have this figured out, Jesus shifts the focus from judgment against another to stewardship of the vineyard of God! Stewards of God's kingdom? We are stewards of this building, our homes, our community, all of creation. It is to point a finger at those who we see abusing God's gifts.

Church leaders, bishops, pastors and lay leaders moan about the lackluster attendance and participation at church events. Church members moan about the pitiful state of our treasury and the lack of commitment from others to give of their treasure, time and talent. We each believe, given the chance, we could run the church so much better.

Think about how ridiculous this parable sounds. A landowner trusts the land to scheming tenants who plot to destroy all that the landowner has, even his son. And that is just how ridiculous God's mercy is. God entrusts all of creation to humans who scheme to destroy the land and one another. Yet, just as God promised mercy to Abraham and Isaac, to Moses and Joshua, God faithfully, repeatedly delivers on those promises. God sent Jesus, the only Son to make creation right, again. Jesus the Christ is the reconciliation that the psalmist cries out for. It is here, at this table that Jesus, by his body and blood reconciles us to God and to one another

The story of a vineyard is never JUST the story of a vineyard. The kingdom of God is like...
a vineyard for the poorly-behaved, undeserving tenants.
a vineyard for the lost and sinful.
a vineyard for the marginalized and oppressed.
a vineyard where all work together to reap the harvest of the kingdom.

There is but one harvest in the vineyard, God's abundant grace through Jesus Christ.
Thanks be to God.