

What Kind of a Vineyard are We?

King of Glory Lutheran
Year C: Pentecost 18: Matthew 21:33-46
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October 3-4, 2020

Telling a story about a vineyard, Jesus speaks harshly to the church leaders. We, too, need to be liberated from arrogant disregard for divine authority both as individuals and as a community. Confession helps us dismantle the power of injustice and walk in new ways. God is a God of new life.

Isaiah 5:1-71 Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 2 He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. 3 And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? 5 And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. 6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. 7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Matthew 21:33-46 [Jesus said to the people:] ³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures:

‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’?

⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

The Gospel of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

This week we've seen on the news the terrible destruction of vineyards in California. Fires have decimated buildings of wine producers and the vines themselves. People are devastated at such loss.

In the Isaiah lesson, it's not people who are devastated and grieving - it is God. We hear God lamenting the fruit of the vine God had hoped for and the fruit that comes. Listen as God speaks.

“What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?” God had tilled the already very fertile soil. God picked out all the stones so roots could grow easily. God made the initial investment. There was the cellar, the bottles and corks, the mesh bags for straining, the test tubs and the fermenting supplies. It was all ready. God had the highest expectations for God's vineyard.

Then... God cries out. “And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?”

God's people, Israel and Judah, were the vineyard. God was the vine grower. God loved God's people. God planned for their very best future. Yet they were wild. They had arrogant disregard for God's divine authority. From Israel and Judah, God expected justice and righteousness, but there was bloodshed instead. They had not obeyed God.

Jesus picks up the Isaiah text in his parable telling another story about a vineyard. It is a violent, terrible story. Jesus tells it so that God's despair turns directly upon the chief priests and the Pharisees, making them the out of control, murderous tenants in the story. They kill every slave who goes to harvest the grapes. These are the people who in that very moment are rejecting and planning to kill God's Son – who stands right before them. These are difficult words to hear. But they are pointed at very specific people at a specific time in history.

“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone (me – Jesus Christ) will be broken to pieces; and it (God's kingdom) will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

Jesus is condemning the priests and the Pharisees of not tending well to God's people. Look what you have done! This will not be your church anymore. This is

God's church, God's kingdom and just like in Isaiah, God will take it away from you for your blatant disregard.

Ouch!

Put under the best possible construction, the priests and Pharisees were trying to do the best they could. They cared for the Torah. They upheld God's law and taught people to do the same. Yet Jesus says the fruit they are producing is wild. They are sour grapes about to be cut off of the one true Vine (capitol V). They have had blatant disregard for any Divine Authority.

This is a challenging passage to hear. Remember that God's lament and Jesus' lament are towards specific people at a specific time.

And yet, if we take the truth of this passage to heart...where have we had blatant disregard for God's divine authority? I'm standing with you today – the text is there and it holds a word for all of us. These are challenging words from our Savior.

So what shall we do? Name places of our disregard for God and confess.

The term 'justice' in prophetic books like Isaiah means basic fairness within society. Justice demands fairness for God's people.

Thinking about justice in 2020, perhaps it is easier to see injustice. Last week during the Synod Theological conference for clergy, our keynote speaker was Rev. Dr. Reggie Williams. He is a Christian ethicist and expert in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian.

Dr. Williams was supposed to preach during Wednesday night worship last week. Last week, Wednesday, was the day the Breonna Taylor charges were announced for one police officer and not the others. Dr. Williams is black. He did not preach his prepared sermon. He spoke to us from the heart. He implored us as white people, white pastors, to "never get used to this." He said, "Tonight there are black people like myself who are grieving. We're grieving for a young woman who had every right that any white woman has. But the system doesn't play fair. Keep loving and do not ever get used to this. This is not right."

King of Glory is a Reconciling in Christ congregation. We voted overwhelmingly 93/7 in 2015 to be an open and welcoming church to all people. Divorced people.

Widows. Gay and lesbian people. People with addictions. Married people. Why did it take us so long to begin a conversation about welcoming our Christian brothers and sisters of other skin colors?

What I am learning is that white privilege is very real. I believe God grieves.

What about our budget and our generosity? Most years we run a shortfall by December and with your generous gifts we make it up to get in the green. Yet we have other pockets of money as well. Are we hoarding what God has given? Are we not walking in faith that if we give more money to the poor, God will provide again?

These are fruits Jesus is talking about. How do we as people of God, become stale, old, bad fruit instead of loving as God loves? Run the church like a business! Yes and no. We're not a business. King of Glory is not our church. We belong to God's Church. We're trying humbly to follow the Cornerstone of Jesus.

Yet...when we name the ways we grieve God's heart...when we confess...when we realize our pride, racial inequity, greed, lack of trust in the true Vine and Vine grower, then we are freed to begin again. We are freed to walk in faith with God's grace at our backs and love guiding our ways. Then we too, can till the soil, throw out the rocks, buy the best vines available for God's people, for God's church.

Will you pray a prayer of confession with me?

Jesus, in this moment we confess to you as individuals and as a community all the ways we've grown wild. At times we willfully disobey you forgetting your Holy claim upon our lives – every aspect of them. Hear our confession. May our lives produce the sweet fruits of your Kingdom. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

As a called and ordained minister, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of your sin, of our sin. Receive now the fullness of God's grace for you. Remember the poor. Amen.