

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 21:33-46

pg 24 NT

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. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other servants, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41 They 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.”

42 Jesus 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’?*

43 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. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

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

This is the Word of the Lord.

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Isaiah 28:14-17a

pg 655 OT

Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers who rule this people in Jerusalem. 15 Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement; when the overwhelming scourge passes through it will not come to us; for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter”; 16 therefore thus says the Lord GOD, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: “One who trusts will not panic.” 17 And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plummet.

This is the word of the Lord.

“Caring for the Vineyard”

How are we doing these days in caring for the vineyard? I want to ask that question and then come back to in just a bit? *How are we doing these days in caring for the vineyard?*

Jesus told this parable during his last week on earth. If you recall, Jesus had come into Jerusalem amid the waving of palm branches on Sunday, and then spent the first days of the week shaking things up, turning up the temperature. He'd cursed a fruitless fig tree, turned over the tables in the Temple and now was confronting the religious leaders who'd challenged his authority.

The parable of the Tenants is the 2nd of 3 parables Jesus told. Matthew relays it to us and to his congregation of Christian Jews and Gentiles, believers who had not only just witnessed the destruction of the Temple and most of Jerusalem, but also were being alienated from their families and persecuted by the Pharisees. They knew and we need know that it should be read as an allegory, wherein every image stands for something. Here, the landowner is God, and the vineyard is the Kingdom of God, “God’s Way”. It has been entrusted to Israel. The wicked tenants are the Jewish religious leaders, the servants sent to collect what was due are the OT prophets, and the landowner’s son is Jesus, if you hadn’t guessed it.

So, a landowner, Jesus said, lovingly created a productive vineyard, put up a fence, a wine press, even a watch tower. He, as was often the custom, left it in the hands of tenants with the proviso that he would receive a portion of the harvest, likely 10%. While the tenants initially agreed, they quickly forgot that they did not own the property. They felt entitled to it, and they chose to do whatever it took to maintain what wasn’t theirs to begin with. This included murdering two sequential groups of servants whom the landowner sent to collect the amount due. They beat them and stoned them. While most landowners would have immediately removed the tenants, this landowner sent his son as emissary, with hopes that they’d respect HIM and give HIM the portion. But the tenants, realized he was the heir and killed him as well.

At this point in the telling of the parable, Jesus stopped to make very clear that the chief priests and Pharisees knew that he was speaking against them. He was charging them and all

past leaders with not having done well with what was entrusted to Israel, God's way.

Throughout long generations, they'd missed the boat by clinging to the letter of the Law and not the intent of it. They'd killed the Jewish prophets. Now they were preparing to reject and kill God's son, whom Jesus revealed IS the cornerstone spoken of in Scripture. Jesus used the Scripture which they knew well, to indict them. In Psalm 118 and Isaiah 28, it is prophesied that God will exalt "the stone that the builders reject to be the chief stone". The chief stone cannot fit anywhere else in the building, except the place of greatest honor, and it is the support on which the entire structure depends. Without it, the structure will fall to crush anything that collides with or opposes it. (Note the wordplay ... "Son" in Hebrew is *ben* and "stone" is *eben*.)¹

Jesus concluded the parable, the allegory, by stating that the landowner was going to give the vineyard to other tenants. This is where we come in. Yes, WE'RE IN the allegory! Do you know who we are? We are the people to whom the kingdom of God has been given. In some translations, we're called the "nation". Douglas Hare says, "*God's purposes in salvation history had been effected in and through Israel up to this time. As a consequence of its rejection of the Messiah, Israel is now to be "decommissioned"; its elect status as "light to the Gentiles" is to be taken over by the church.*"² That means, brothers and sisters, that WE are the ones who are now accountable to the land owner. And WE are charged with the responsibility of caring for the vineyard and producing its fruits.

So, what does that entail? Well, caring for the vineyard, God's kingdom, begins with our first remembering that we don't own it. It is all on loan to us so we need to not harm it, hoard it, nor waste it...instead we need respect it, nurture it, and help it to bloom & grow as the landowner wants. At harvest, we have the responsibility of returning at least a portion of it back to the One who lovingly created it.

Included in the Kingdom, God's way, is obviously God's love for the planet and its creatures. So, we need first honor and continue this by rejoicing in its beauty. What did Calvin say, "*There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make*

¹ Tom Wright. *Matthew for Everyone (pt 2)*. (Louisville: WJKP; 2002), 80.

² Douglas Hare. *Interpretation. Matthew*. (Louisville: KNP, 1993), 248-249.

us rejoice”? And we need continue God’s love for the Creation by sharing the earth’s resources with those who do not have enough, and conserving them for generations which follow us. We need to too stop the violence that is routinely inflicted by the human race upon the earth...poisoning of water and soil and air, deforestation, poaching, improper management of waste, oil spills, abuse of animals, manipulation of the natural systems, etc.

Caring for the vineyard also includes honoring and continuing the love God has for God’s people. We need to produce fruit, that is (*slowly*)...be compassionate and kind to those who are weak and suffering, offer understanding and hospitality to those who are lost and strangers in the land, provide welcome to those who are on the outside looking in, meet challenges with patience, forgiveness and forbearance, seek justice for the oppressed, and speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. We also need grow peace. (*repeat*).

You know, I struggled with this a bit this week, for this working for peace seems particularly difficult when there is so much senseless, horrible violence surrounding us. It occurred to me that it arouses both a discouragement and a frustration, an anger even. I’ve had trouble with the heart-breaking images and stories of Las Vegas this week in my mind. Depravity and disregard for life once again, once again is in our midst. And it is difficult to then read this text and not be struck by the violence in it, by the violence done by tenants against servants and the violence threatened on those who stumble on the “cornerstone”.

This week, I kept thinking, “Peace is what God ultimately desires for us all”? So then I looked closer at the text, and saw past the words (which were written by the man, Matthew, for a very vulnerable and persecuted congregation). I looked past the words and the context to the actions instead and I saw something different, something familiar and consistent with the way of the God which I know. Quoting David Lose, “Rather than return violence for violence, in the CROSS of Jesus, God responds with life, with resurrection, with Jesus’ triumph over death and his offering, not of retribution but peace.”³ (*slowly*) Yes. Jesus took our VIOLENCE upon

³ David Lose. “Words and Deeds”. In: In the Meantime. <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/10/pentecost-18-a-words-and-deeds/> (accessed 10-7-17)

himself and gave us a new life, a new way. And “*It is amazing in our eyes*”. In caring for the vineyard, we need always grow peace.

So now I ask you the question again, “*How do you think we are doing in caring for the vineyard, God’s Kingdom, that which has entrusted to us?* (pause) It’s a hard question for it is a hard time. There is much that we, the church, are doing well and we need lift it up. Great deeds of love, of courage, of sacrifice are being offered for God’s planet and people every day. The tremendous outpouring of love which has been obvious in the recent tragedies is a good example. It all, all of it, brings God glory. But then again, there is much in which we are struggling. The job is not easy. The challenges to the Kingdom are great. Dishonesty, frightening rhetoric, entitlement and hypocrisy are, like violence, very prevalent around us, to the point that they are becoming expected and even acceptable. The attitude of “justice for all meaning justice for a few”,⁴ doesn’t surprise us anymore. Civility in discourse and respect for the other’s opinion, let alone respect for the Other, is becoming rare in the public arena. And consequently, it is easy to give into fear, discouragement, complacency and.... silence.

But this is all the more reason, brothers and sisters, that we need to be the church and continue caring for the vineyard. Mission Presbytery’s Executive Presbyter, Sallie Watson this week wrote in her column that “*we are currently in that Kairos moment when we are called to be The Church: to face our chairs outward instead of inward, to speak God’s truth and to speak it boldly, to not just “look for the helpers” but to be the helpers, and to do so without regard—even, at the risk of its life*”.⁵

Brothers and sisters, let us, in this time and place, keep that question always before us. Let’s pray fervently, and listen for God’s voice. Let’s feel the Spirit around us. Let’s go forward and continue to be the new, good and vigilant tenants, caring well for God’s vineyard. Amen.

⁴ Karoline Lewis, “*Caring for the Kingdom of Heaven*” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4979> (accessed 10-6-17).

⁵ Sallie Watson. *Presbyter Ponderings*. 10-5-2017. <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/15ef20060aa9e3f4> (accessed 10-6-17)