

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 5: 1-7
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 21: 33-46
October 4, 2020
WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

“The Vineyard”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Today’s scripture follows on directly from last week. Jesus was in a full-blown confrontation with the chief priests and elders in the Temple. He had already told them one unflattering parable. And now right on its heels comes a second.

The imagery of Israel as God’s vineyard was ancient. In fact, those hearing Jesus speak would have quite naturally thought of our reading from Isaiah today. In Isaiah the owner also set a hedge around the vineyard and built a winepress and a watchtower. While these would have been familiar practices to the audiences, they were also not cheap. In both stories from the Old and New Testaments the owner of the vineyard spared no expense. Everything was set up for maximum long-term benefit. In the first few years of a vineyard the crop is meager. It takes four to five years for it to become truly productive. This was long-term planning.

Here the two stories take a turn. Both are allegories, but in Isaiah the grapes themselves are the problem. They turn wild and unproductive. Wild grapevines have a lot of vine, and not much fruit. Growing grapes is an art. It requires careful pruning and vigilance. But in Jesus’s story the critical players are the tenants—those put in charge of the vineyard. In this story when the season to harvest the fruit came, the owner sent servants to collect a portion of the proceeds—basically the rent. The owner would know that there wouldn’t be much to begin with, but it was essential that he do this, because tenants who could prove that no one ever came to collect rent from them could claim the land as their own after a few years.

Here is where the story begins to get outrageous. It is, after all, a parable. The first servants came. They beat one, kill another, and stone a third. It’s important for us to note that Jeremiah was beaten and put in stocks (Jeremiah 20: 2), Zechariah was stoned to death in the Temple courtyard (2 Chronicles 24: 21) and the prophet Uriah was hunted down and dragged back from Egypt and killed (Jeremiah 26: 21-23). For people who knew these stories well, the direct correlation would be hard to miss. Taking it at the level of a story, however, if this had been a REAL event, not a parable, things would have come to a close rather quickly at this point, because the owner would have sent soldiers in and had the tenants arrested and put to death. But this is a story

about God's patience, and in this story the owner sent still more servants, who were treated the same way. Then the owner does something incredibly stupid and naïve from our point of view. He decides to send his own son, saying, "Surely they will respect my son." But of course, they do not. They see the son coming and immediately plot to kill him, thinking that in that way they can steal his inheritance. Of course, that is not the way to gain an inheritance. All of those in Jesus' audience would have known the folly of such an idea. The tenants are fools, however. They kill the son outside of the vineyard and leave his body there, just as Jesus died outside the city walls. At the conclusion of his story Jesus turned to the chief priests and elders and asked, "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

It is likely that the chief priests and elders had identified themselves with the owner of the vineyard at this point, not the tenants. They were of the rich upper classes who DID own vineyards and dealt with tenants, and so they were unsparing in their condemnation. "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Jesus then abruptly switched images on them, asking, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" This is a quote from Psalm 118: 22-23. Why on earth did Jesus go there? This is a perfect example of where having to translate from one language to another trips us up. Jesus was doing a bit of wordplay. In Aramaic the word for son is ben, and the word for stone is eben. He was saying that the son is the stone that was rejected. The cornerstone is essential in any structure. It must be perfect because the two walls built out from it will determine the shape of the building, but this cornerstone, this son, was rejected.

Hindsight is easy, but the people at the time were trying to figure out exactly what Jesus was saying. In his allegory it seems pretty clear that the servants were all of the prophets who were rejected, but who is the son? If the owner is God, how is it that God could have a son? And furthermore, if the son is the stone that was rejected, that means God's son will be rejected.

Later generations have interpreted this story to mean that the church replaces the synagogue, but that is not a given. Jesus' criticism here is not of Judaism, but of the Jewish leaders who were corrupt. In his encounters with them he didn't reject Jewish teaching, he clarified and refined it. Where the Pharisees tied themselves in knots with legalism, Jesus cut through to the heart and the heart's intention. And when coming up against the Temple authorities who were making a fortune exploiting people through the sacrificial system, Jesus threw the moneychangers out of the Temple. He confronted the leaders who were only in it for themselves and did not care about God or the people.

God is incredibly patient with the human race. Over many centuries God's children have been faithful for periods of time, and then unfaithful. God sent prophets to get them back on the right track. Sometimes they listened, but often they killed the messenger. And when we would have just given up, God took the most drastic step of all. God sent God's son.

Jesus is the cornerstone of God's kingdom, and yet he was rejected by those he came to save. And this was not a surprise to God. Even as he spoke these words, Jesus knew the fate that lay ahead of him. These parables were told in a moment of great tension. Jesus was facing the full weight and condemnation of the Temple leadership. Something was going to break, and it would be soon. But God sent God's son, and not another prophet, because God's son could do what no prophet could. God's son could redeem us. God's son could rise from the grave. God's son could reconcile an unreconcilable world.

Today is World Communion Sunday. Our world is fractured. Our nation is fractured, and we are facing a trio of cataclysms, the environmental disasters of fire and flood from climate change, a deadly virus, and a political battle that is ripping the nation apart. Our president now has the coronavirus. And injustice and grave inequality are everywhere we look in the world. Yet this is the world God has not given up on. This is the world for which Christ died. If God has not given up on us, let us not give up on one another. Today we will pray for the world of nations, and for Christians of every race and in every place, especially those in nations where persecution is a real and present danger. We will pray for our election, and we will pray for all of those fighting this virus. We must remember that no matter how challenging the times are, God sent God's son Jesus. The cornerstone of a new world has already been set in place. Amen

Isaiah 5: 1-7

5 I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit.
3 "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.
4 What more could have been done for my vineyard
than I have done for it?
When I looked for good grapes,
why did it yield only bad?
5 Now I will tell you
what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge,
and it will be destroyed;
I will break down its wall,
and it will be trampled.

⁶ I will make it a wasteland,
neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briars and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
not to rain on it.”
⁷ The vineyard of the Lord Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Matthew 21: 33-46

³³ “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. ³⁵ “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. ³⁸ “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹ “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.” ⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes”^[a]? ⁴³ “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”^[b] ⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.