

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 22
Year A

To Work in the Vineyard
[RCL] Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

The easiest way for a preacher to deal with the challenging story in today's Gospel reading might be to understand it as simply a metaphor for events we already know well - another tale of deadly confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leadership of his day. As we heard at the end of the passage, the religious chiefs perceived that Jesus was referring to them as the wicked tenants. Therefore, they felt threatened and angry and decided to arrest Jesus. However, they had to wait for a more opportune time because they feared resistance from the crowd of Jesus' followers. And of course, we remember what happened next – Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion – all followed by the resurrection that concluded the action and began a whole new relationship between God and another people.

To follow the story in this way is to see it as an allegory, explaining how the church grew beyond the control of the then-current religious establishment. In such a symbolic narrative, each character corresponds to something in real life. The wicked tenants represent the religious leaders of Jerusalem, the owner of the vineyard is God, the vineyard itself is Israel, the slaves sent to collect the owner's share are the Old Testament Prophets, the son is Jesus, and the new tenants who would gain use of the vineyard are the Gentiles and/or Jesus-following Jews.

But, to be honest, all this does is provide for us a history lesson, and, in fact, one that we already know. A more difficult way to deal with the story in today's Gospel is to find courage enough to reflect on a more general theme that few like to consider – the concept of God as a condemning divinity. We may need to face up to the possibility that the story reveals God to us as a punishing one, prone toward retribution against those who choose not to follow his way. The wicked tenants who failed to give God his due suffered the fate of a miserable death, losing all they had hoped to gain for refusing to pay their fair rent, not giving the owner, not giving God, what he deserved.

How can we face the seeming inconsistency of knowing God as loving and gracious and all-giving on the one hand, and on the other - following the tone of today's story – seeing God as a punishing and judging entity?

And closer to home – can we face the question, “What connection is there between ourselves and the wicked tenants and the selfish, misguided religious leaders who rejected Jesus?” Could their fate also be ours? After all, don't we often shy away from what Christ would have us do? Are we not sometimes selfish like the wicked tenants? Do we not refuse to share the fruits of the

“vineyard” as stingily and stubbornly as they? How often have we failed to respond lovingly to the gifts of God’s creation that envelope our lives – the good earth, the resources we use to sustain ourselves, other people – our brothers and sisters who dwell beside us in this blessed life? Does it not follow, then, that we also deserve to be put to a miserable death?

But surely there is something wrong with such an assessment. Perhaps a better way to deal with this dilemma is to examine today’s story in the full context of the Gospel, to view it against the backdrop of all we know of God’s action in Christ. Then we can draw a less harsh—and truer—conclusion about the conflict of experiencing a totally loving God and the punishment apparent in today’s story. As Christians, we always start with the fact that God initiates the relationship with us – not we with God. God calls us to be in unity with him and all people. God’s reaching out to us is best understood as his giving us everything we have - with no strings attached and without our deserving it, without our having done anything to gain it. Despite this, Jesus made it clear that we are the most precious beings in all creation – so valuable, as he proved on the cross, that we are worth dying for.

We don’t have to earn God’s love; it is given freely. So, why would a loving God put us to a miserable death? The answer to this question lies not in the possibility that we might wind up experiencing a miserable spiritual death, but, if so, to recognize that such a fate can only result because of our choosing. The wicked tenants received all they needed from the owner, but they refused to accept his graciousness and turned their backs on him, his servants, and even his son. They, by their actions and inactions, *cast themselves* out of the vineyard, no less than Adam and Eve’s disobedience resulted in their loss of the benefits of the Garden of Eden. The miserable death we might experience can only result from our failure to accept the gifts of God and respond to them in thanksgiving and by reflecting God’s love back on that creation and all people in it. It can only result from our selfishly acting as if the vineyard is all ours – or should be all ours and no one else’s, let alone God’s.

It is not so much that God’s patience with us might eventually run out, causing us to be put to a miserable death. It is more like our time runs out only because we wait too long to catch on to what God wants for us, and then we actually by our actions or inactions cast ourselves out of God’s vineyard, producing a self-inflicted kind of misery that we alone can create.

Today’s Gospel story, of course, provides for us a warning about what we can miss out on if we act like the wicked servants. It reminds us of the great theme of stewardship that is so central to the life of the church and to the healthful focus of individual Christians. When we sing the familiar words, “Praise God from who all blessings flow,” we need to remember the actions that they imply – that we need to “walk the talk” by remembering that what we have is not ours to own, but is on loan from God. We need to remember that God’s way of grace and love is wooing us to respond to our good fortune of living in his vineyard by reflecting that love in our actions

toward others. That as we care for, as we exercise stewardship over God's creation - especially our fellow human beings – we do so as a reflection of God's love. That love is poured out to us in such measure that it overflows from us, and through us can overflow onto all creation. An overflow that allows us to maintain creation and preserve it and protect it from harm. An overflow that impels us to love others and share with them the Good News of God in Christ – a truth they might miss if we ignore our mission and neglect that which so graciously enriches us.

If, in reflecting on today's Gospel story, we will concentrate on God's setting us up on a fabulous vineyard, lovingly and graciously giving us all we have, we can recognize that this is his way of coaxing us and wooing us and encouraging us into being good and faithful servants – good and loving workers in the world he has left to our care – good and faithful followers of his son, Jesus. Wooing us to give and pray for the spread of his kingdom and for the wellbeing of his children, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

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