

Isaiah 5: 1-7
Psalm 80: 7-19
Matthew 21: 33-44

Fruits of the Kingdom
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Martin Luther once said that sometimes you have to squeeze a biblical passage until it leaks the gospel. Kind of like squeezing grapes for their juice. So I am going to follow Luther's advice – otherwise it will be hard to preach faithfully on the parable of the wicked tenants.

Two things to keep in mind when we start squeezing. First, the vineyard was an ancient, well-used image or metaphor for the people of Israel. Back before 700 BC, the prophet Isaiah wrote some poetry (he ironically named it a love song) about a vineyard that did not live up to the expectations of the owner. Instead of sweet, rich, cultivated fruit, it produces sour wild grapes. So the owner decided to leave it to its own devices, taking down the protective hedge and wall, stopping the usual pruning and hoeing, and even withholding water. That's what happens to vineyards (and nations) that operate out of injustice and bloodshed: they are left on their own to manage in a dangerous world. And it does not usually go well. In Psalm 80, the psalmist seems to pick up the poem after all this has come to pass. "Restore us," he cries, "come back to the vineyard, look down from heaven, let your face shine." So when Jesus begins his parable, "There was a landlord who planted a vineyard..." his audience, the chief priests and elders of the people, are on familiar ground. Or are they?

Because the second thing we have to keep in mind is that this is the last week of Jesus' life: it is between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. The city of Jerusalem is tense, with lots of Roman soldiers, lots of Passover pilgrims, lots of nervous leaders. The parables Jesus tells at this stage of his ministry seem pointed, harsh and judgmental. They lead their hearers into traps, or into more questions, or into false certainty. For centuries, Christians have used these conversations and parables with the Jews as fuel for anti-Semitism. The Gospel writer even cleverly has the chief priests and elders of the people pronounce their own sentence in answer to the question, "What will the owner of the vineyard do to those wicked tenants?" They walk right into it: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants, etc., etc..." So high-minded Christians have often read this as self-vindication, a way to give themselves free rein in the persecution of the descendants of those priests and elders. May we not be guilty of using the same lens in reading this passage or any of this section of Matthew's Gospel. So let's keep squeezing.

Or maybe we are the ones who need the squeezing, in the form of uncomfortable questions. Knowing the history of 700 BC or ancient Jerusalem should not remove us from Isaiah's and Jesus' parables, or the heartfelt prayer of the Psalmist. Knowing that these words were spoken once long ago should not make them a purely academic study. We still need to answer some questions. What is the vineyard, today? Who are the tenants, today? Let's internalize a bit, as though the vineyard is here and now, the land beneath our feet; as though we are the tenants, when we do not value the land or the fruit or the peace. And perhaps, when we hear such parables, we are the elders of the people, who leap to the most violent solution to tales of crime: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death..." With eyes blinded by greed and revenge, with reverence dulled, we cannot see the beauty of holiness in the vineyard, we cannot even taste the goodness of the harvest. And, we

give ourselves a pass on economic justice, forgetting the mercy and abundance we have already received.

Back in the late 1990's, the Mission Board and the Senior Youth Group of this church cooperated to put on a Hunger Banquet. There are a number of ways to do one of these, but our method was to welcome people to the meal, take their \$5 admission fee, and seat them at tables, which were randomly set with different color place mats. If you got a red place mat (about 10% of the attendees) you were attentively served with roast beef, potatoes, vegetables, coffee or tea and chocolate cake. And the waiters kept asking if you wanted more. If you got a blue place mat, (about 30% of those eating) you got mac and cheese, cole slaw, some tea, and a piece of fruit. You could get seconds if you asked, but not more. If you got a white place mat (about 60% of those present) you got a plate of rice and beans and a cup of water. And then you were ignored. Of course the point of all this was not to make a lot of money, or to have a great meal out (because you probably wouldn't) but to have a discussion afterwards about how it felt and what that meant in terms of local and world hunger. I remember that Bob Nye stood up and said that he thought that the portions of rice and beans were actually misleading: they were too generous and too nourishing to really give us an idea of how most of the world eats. But this is Norwich, after all, and those of us organizing the event couldn't bring ourselves to be too harsh and realistic – not at a Hunger Banquet. We even give ourselves a break on our virtuous illustrations of economic justice.

The bad news might be: we are the tenants of the vineyard, and we have not always behaved well. The good news might be: we are the tenants of the vineyard, and the owner will not stop sending messengers to us, so that we might eventually learn to produce the fruits of the Kingdom. We are the blessed and gifted tenants of the vineyard of God. Yes, there are consequences to mismanagement: we have seen plenty of them already - in the blasted environment, in the hungry children of the world, in the war-torn nations of Iraq and Afghanistan. But there is more than bad consequences in our parables. There is the possibility of change and a new vision. There is the image (not in the parable, but in our hopes) of workers in a vineyard with a long-term commitment to the land and to the fruit and to people and to future generations. There is an image (not in our passage, but in our hopes) of a peaceful vineyard, which, after all, can only flourish in times of peace, which gives vines a chance to mature and fruit a chance to ripen. There is an image (only implied in the readings, but alive in our hopes) of a vineyard that is productive, of wine that has had time to age: sustenance, security. This is an image, a vision that is not a just local – it is a dream that belongs to the whole world.

An old proverb says, “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time to plant a tree is now.” To speak in the language of our parables, the best time to tend our vineyard and produce good fruit was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.

Today we read two hard parables and one remorseful psalm. These words of Scripture will not let us rest easy. They do not allow us to point a finger at others. They call out for commitment and change.

I end with the words of Oscar Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador who was killed by those who oppressed the land and the people on it:

“It is very easy to be servants of the word without disturbing the world: a very spiritualized word, a word without any commitment to history, a word that can sound in any part of the world because it belongs to no part of the world. A word like that creates no problems, starts no conflicts.”

What starts conflicts and persecutions, what marks the genuine church, is the word that, burning like the word of the prophets, proclaims and accuses; proclaims to the people God's wonders to be believed and venerated, and accuses of sin those who oppose God's reign, so that they may tear that sin out of their hearts, out of their societies, out of their laws – out of the structures that oppress, that imprison, that violate the rights of God and of humanity. This is the hard service of the word.”

May God bless us to be doers of the word, and not hearers only. Amen.