

“A Vineyard, Its Owner, and Its Workers”

If you will recall from last week, we're at the place in the gospel of Matthew where Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem and been hailed by the people as if he were a king, challenging the civil authorities.

He had gone straight to the temple, overturning tables and chairs, and clearing out the money changers and merchants, challenging the religious authorities. And before anyone could stop him, he had made throwing him out impossible because he had begun healing people actually making blind people see & lame people walk! The religious authorities and the civil authorities were relieved to see him leave the temple and the city at the end of the day.

But the next day he had returned to the city and the temple, and there he had begun to teach. At that point, the temple leaders challenge his authority.

He responded by telling a parable about a father's authority that was clearly meant to remind the temple leaders that they were not really the ones in charge – God was.

And in our reading today, Jesus continues with another parable, this one using an image that was used over and over again in the Hebrew scriptures – that of a vineyard owner representing God and a vineyard representing Israel.

In fact, Jesus may have had in mind the very scripture that we read today, the one from Isaiah 5. In it, Isaiah sings a song about his beloved – God – who had land on a fertile hill, and who dug it, cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines, building a watch tower in the midst of it, and hewing out a wine vat in it.

In other words, God created a beautiful vineyard, a beautiful people, but instead of living up to God's expectations of yielding the finest grapes – that is, justice and righteousness – it yielded bloodshed and crying.

And so God threatens to destroy the vineyard, to remove its hedge so that it is devoured, to break down its walls so that it will be trampled down, and to cause it to be overgrown with briars and thorns to make it a waste place.

In our psalm today, it seems that God has carried out his threat, for the psalmist's writes, “Why have you broken down its walls so that ... the wild boar ... has ravaged it, and the beasts ... have grazed upon it?”

And then the Psalmist cries out, “Turn now...look down from heaven; behold, & tend this vine; preserve what your right hand has planted”.

Jesus uses a similar image, but in his story, the owner is still God, but the vineyard is the world and God's chosen people are the workers.

In Jesus' parable, the owner leaves the workers in charge, trusting them to do what they were hired to do,

but when he sends his servants to collect the produce, the workers attack, and even kill, them. The owner gives them another chance and sends some more servants – who meet the same fate.

And then the owner sends his son.

And this is where the story takes a shocking turn

because the workers decide to kill the son, so that “they can get the son’s inheritance”!

What????!!!!

They killed his son so that they will get the inheritance?!

Obviously, these workers are insane, because there is no rational reason in the world

that killing the son would end up giving them the land.

It makes no sense. Such delusional thinking is hard to even comprehend.

They are absolutely out of their minds, clearly crazy.

And as if the story isn’t shocking enough, by telling it,

Jesus is telling the religious authorities that this is how THEY are acting towards God.

God has entrusted them with his people and God has sent his servants the prophets

to call them back to loving God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength

but instead of listening, they have killed the prophets;

they have been complicit in the killing of John the Baptist;

and Jesus already knows that they will be complicit in killing him.

But Jesus’ words were not simply addressed to the religious authorities.

They are addressed to everyone who enjoys any kind of authority or power or privilege.

God has entrusted the world to us. God has entrusted this country to us.

God has entrusted this state to us. God has entrusted the city to us.

And people without health insurance go without healthcare.

Anxiety and depression and other mental illnesses are at an all-time high.

One out of every five people in this are lives with food insecurity.

The majority of kids graduating from Bridgeport high schools are functionally illiterate.

The number of gun deaths in this country is obscene.

The percentage of people, especially black men, who are incarcerated in this country is beyond belief.

We lease convicts who make seven cents an hour to pick cotton and who live in worse conditions

than their enslaved ancestors who picked cotton on the same land!

Our soil is depleted of nutrients.

Catastrophic natural disasters have increased 100 fold in the last 50 years.

God has left us workers in charge of the vineyard and we have made a mess of it.

And we’ve let the problems get so immense that they overwhelm us,

and we are too paralyzed to do anything about them.

But here’s the thing.

The crises that we have created are not simply political or organizational or structural or societal.

If we try to attack them on that level, we will fail.

All of the crises stem from one cause: We have not listened to God.

We have not submitted our wills to God. We have not obeyed God. We have not followed God.

We have not loved God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength.

We have not spent enough time worshiping God, praising God, thanking God, blessing God.

We have not spent enough time in Bible study. We have not spent enough time in prayer.

Instead of submitting our wills to God, we, who have a measure of power and privilege in society

due to the color of our skin, the education afforded to us, and our relative economic comfort,

have exercised our own wills.

This is what Paul was saying in our second lesson.

He lists all of the reasons that he has to be confident in his own power and privilege:

*he “was circumcised on the 8th day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew, born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”*

Paul could not have been more respected as a Jew. Plus, he was a Roman citizen!

And he was extremely well educated by the best teacher in Israel.

Paul had power and privilege and was on his way up the ladder of success...

...until that day, on the road to Damascus, when light blinded him and the risen Christ spoke to him.

And at that moment his life was transformed.

Paul continues in our lesson for today,

*“yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ...*

*I regard everything as loss [he actually uses the word “dung” or “excrement” here!]*

*because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.”*

Everything that Paul was, and everything that Paul has, Paul considers garbage

when compared to his relationship with Jesus Christ.

And these aren't just words for Paul,

because he is constantly putting his life on the line in order to live out Christ's call on his life.

Paul makes it clear that living a righteous life doesn't come from following the law –

it doesn't come thru trying to correct all of the problems in society with his own power & privilege.

Living a righteous life comes through loving God with all of his heart and soul and mind and strength,

and sharing the good news of the life-transforming power of the risen Christ.

And this is not done through his own power, but through the power of the Holy Spirit.

You see, what Paul knows is that when you love God, when your desire is to follow Jesus,

and when you open yourself up to the Spirit,

the Spirit begins to transform your life in a way that will impact every person around you.

And as the Spirit works in you and through you,

then all of those changes that God desires for our city and state and country and world

will begin to happen.

God is the owner of the vineyard.

God chose Israel to work in the vineyard to produce a harvest that would feed all nations of the world.

And whenever Israel didn't listen, God sent the prophets to call them back into right relationship.

But when that wasn't enough, God sent Jesus. And Jesus sent the Spirit.

The vineyard for which we are responsible is a mess,

and there's no way we can clean it up and get it back in order on our own.

But we don't have to.

All we need to do is to allow the Spirit to grow in us the fruits of love and joy, peace and patience,

goodness, kindness, gentleness and faithfulness, and self-control.

All we need to do is to follow where the Spirit leads.

All we need to do is share the good news of the life-transforming power of the risen Christ.

All we need to do is to love God with all that we are. Amen