

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

The parable we heard this morning in the gospel of Matthew is a delicious and somewhat fluid explanation of who Jesus is and who is really in charge. This beautiful and complicated allegory contains a number of important messages. We know that Jesus has been in conversation with the religious leaders ... the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the Scribes and the Elders ... who are questioning by what authority Jesus is acting. He has overthrown the tables of the money changers in the Temple. He has exorcised demons. He has healed the paralytic and infirm. He has restored sight to the blind and he has cursed a fig tree that did not bear fruit and caused it to wither and die. The religious leaders in the Temple want to know: By what right and what authority are you doing these things?

The allegory that Jesus tells them ... and us ... is the third response he makes to them without directly answering their question. The first reply from Jesus was to ask them if baptism of John is from heaven or from men? They don't have an answer. The second reply from Jesus was to tell them the parable of the two sons sent to work in the vineyard by their father. One says "No" but ends up going. The other says "Yes" but does not go. Jesus wants to know from the religious leaders which one of the sons did his father's will. They answer "The first." It is then that Jesus tells them that the first son represents the tax collectors and the harlots who will enter into the kingdom of God before they will.

And then Jesus launches into this third parable about the vineyard and the landowner and the wicked tenants. This story is often referred to as the parable of the wicked tenants, but their wickedness is not really the central message of the story.

Jesus begins the parable by describing a vineyard. It sounds very much like a parable in the book of Isaiah ... one that all Jewish people in Matthew's audience know well.

From Isaiah 5:1-7:

"Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dugged it and cleared it of stones, and planted

it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.”

Now in this parable, the beloved is God and the vineyard is Israel. God had wonderful plans for Israel, did all that was possible to ensure a good harvest and had great expectations for Israel. But Israel was a disappointment. Israel did not bear good fruit, but unusable wild grapes. The problem in this vineyard was the product itself. Unacceptable and a disappointment.

The problem in the vineyard that Jesus describes is not with a substandard product, but in the dysfunctional delivery system. In this parable about the vineyard, the landowner is God; the vineyard is Israel; and the tenants who have been allowed to tend the vineyard represent the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. The fault lies not with Israel this time, but with Israel’s leaders. And God is the one who put them in charge and trusted them. When the harvest comes, they behave as if they owned the vineyard and all that it had produced. They seem to have forgotten who has given them the authority to work the land. And they seem to have forgotten whose land it is. They forget that they are stewards of the vineyard. They act as if it belonged to them exclusively.

They are vicious in their response when the landowner sends a delegation to collect that portion of the harvest that is his. The delegation in this parable represents the prophets. And then the landowner sends his son thinking that the tenants will surely honor him. In an honor and shame based society, that’s a reasonable expectation, but he is met with violence as well. The tenants promptly kill the son of the landowner.

Jesus wants to know what the religious leaders think the landowner will do to the wicked tenants. They answer with the same kind of vicious and merciless violence that describes them in the parable. Like we humans are so prone to do, they believe God will react the same way they would in similar circumstances ... mean and vicious and merciless. They believe that God will put those wretches to a miserable death. They also think that that God will replace those wicked tenants with good tenants who will give God the portion of the harvest that he is due when the time comes.

But this is where the parable gets very fluid. Jesus suddenly shifts the metaphor from the vineyard to the one about the building stone. He begins talking about the rejected stone that will become the cornerstone of the structure that God is building in the world ... the kingdom of God. And Jesus confirms that God will, indeed, take away the vineyard and will give it to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom.

The new tenants would be us ... the believers and followers of Jesus. What kind of stewards will we be? How will we take care of what has been entrusted to us. Israel has already been given the rules by which to produce good fruit. We heard them this morning when we heard the Ten Commandments. Those are the rules. Those are the expectations. Those are the laws for Israel to live by and they are the laws that we ... as the new tenants of the vineyard ... are to live by. These are the laws that teach us how to love God and how to love our neighbors as ourselves. They teach us how to produce good fruit. The fruit that we offer to the landowner as a result of these laws that we keep and this love in our hearts that we nurture ... both love for God and love for neighbor ... are explained to us in St. Paul's letter to the Galatians 5:22 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." These are the gifts of the Spirit that we cultivate and nourish within us. As we use these gifts, they become a greater and greater part of us and an acceptable offering to God.

Recently, a friend of mine who claims to be an atheist said to me, "If everyone who claims to be a Christian actually did the things that Jesus told his followers to do, the world would be transformed!"

BINGO!

And by what authority do we do those things? By what authority do we put into practice the things that Jesus has asked us to do as his followers? We do them by the grace of God and by our willingness to give back to God a portion of what God has given us ... the capacity to follow the instructions of Jesus Christ. For we remember that all that we are and all that we have are on loan to us from our Creator. The total of creation belongs to God. We return to God a portion of what he has allowed us to use and be.

Our time in this life is very fleeting and never guaranteed as we were once again reminded by the gruesome slaying of innocent people in Las Vegas last weekend. Those souls have been returned to the Lord as we will be one day as well. We know that evil exists in the world. Evil existed in the world when Jesus walked the earth. And still, he bids us to live the way he taught us. He bids us to stand firm against evil by not allowing it to make us cynical or frightened. We are asked not to allow evil to suck us into its sphere of influence by responding with vitriol and hate, but by using the self-control that is a gift of the Spirit; the patience and the kindness that have been given to us; the faithfulness and goodness that have been modelled for us; the love that has been lavished on us and that we are not only to give back to God, but to share with others ... especially the ones we are least inclined to want to love.

What dwells within us then, as our legacy as followers of Jesus Christ and our mandate as his followers, is the joy and peace that cannot be described. These are God's gifts to us as we return a portion of these fruits to the One who created us ... the One by whose authority we follow Jesus Christ ... the one Creator, Almighty God, the true owner of all that we are and all that we have.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.