

## Proper 22, Year A

October 5, 2014

Matthew 21:33-43

*Jesus said, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."*

God had a vision, a dream. He would plant a vineyard, and from that vineyard he would harvest the most glorious grapes imaginable. Large, sweet, full clusters of grapes. And from those grapes would come the finest wine imaginable. The Lord envisioned his goal, and then he acted. He planted his vineyard. He hedged it round about, dug the wine press, built the tower – did everything he possibly could so that his vineyard would produce abundantly. Then the Lord gave it into the hands of stewards to care for, to gather one day the fruits of his vision.

When the time came for the harvest, the Lord sent servants to collect his produce. But his servants were beaten, killed and stoned by the stewards of the vineyard—not once, but twice. In his frustration he sent his own son, thinking that surely the tenants would respect and receive *him*. But the stewards, having their **own** dreams of keeping the vineyard for *themselves*, **killed** his son. Yet the Lord's dream would not be thwarted. He removed the unfaithful and wicked stewards and appointed others to take their places, and those new stewards produced for the owner the fruits of his dream.

Like all parables, this one can be interpreted at several levels. In its historical setting, the parable speaks of the Jewish religious leaders having failed God. The leaders of old did not listen to the prophets God sent, even killing some of them. The religious leaders in **Jesus'** day did not listen to *him*, but put him to death (this is one of several times in Matthew that Jesus predicts his own death). When Matthew writes his Gospel some 50 years *after* Jesus' resurrection, Jewish religious leaders of *that* time **excommunicated** many of the Jewish followers of *Jesus*, including those – it is thought – in Matthew's own community. But in a

classic Gospel reversal, we are told that God will throw the religious leaders out of his vineyard and bring in new, faithful stewards – presumably like those in Matthew’s Christian community, the followers of Jesus whom the religious leaders had excommunicated, rejected, and even in some instances, killed. These **new** stewards will faithfully tend God’s vineyard so that God’s dream will come to fulfillment.

That’s the strictly historical interpretation of this parable, and Matthew’s first listeners would have understood it immediately.

But I would suggest that, in addition to this historical interpretation of the parable, there is a *deeper* level of meaning, also, that speaks to **all** of us who would work in God’s vineyard, God’s kingdom. At this deeper level of meaning, God’s vineyard is the world He created, and we humans are the tenants, the stewards God has placed on this earth to care for it and to bring to fulfillment God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven – symbolized by the fine wine which will come from the rich, sweet grapes of the vineyard. God has put us in the midst of this world of rich abundance and blessing, and all of the wonder and power of God’s creative, fruitful being is in our midst. We need only stand daily in thankfulness and gratitude for this amazing opportunity to live fully each day, to be faithful stewards of life in God’s world, returning its fruits to God.

But it seems that we share some characteristics of those first tenants in the parable. The owner of the vineyard had gone to another country, and as the saying goes, “out of sight, out of mind”. Similarly, **we** do not *see* God, so he is often out of **our** minds, as well. We begin to think that this vineyard belongs to us, and take actions to secure it for our own possession. Not “**Thy** kingdom come, **thy** will be done” but rather “**My** kingdom come, **my** will be done.” John Shea writes: “Through the use of [our] freedom, [we] separate [ourselves] from God and from other people. In doing this, [we] also separate [ourselves] from [our] own souls.” (*On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 294) We become, in the words of St. Augustine, “curved in on ourselves”. In our self-isolation, we don’t want anything to do with God or those who are sent to speak God’s word. We turn that which is *meant* to be **shared** to our own exclusive use. And by living in such a manner we lose even that which we have claimed as our own. It gets to such a point that God could even appear before us in human form, and we would refuse him entrance into the vineyard of our lives, under the mistaken, warped assumption that then we could have the vineyard all for ourselves. We don’t **want** to be *tenants* or *stewards* of this world and this life, we want it all. We want to be the **owners**, so we reject the owner’s son, or at best treat him as irrelevant. We avoid with a passion the very thing that will save us.

*Abundant life* is what emerges as life-experiences are born out of God-inspired dreams, and those moments are received as gifts, then used as God intended in his dreams for human life.

Yet we so often forget that Life **is** Gift! We clutch it to ourselves, we fail to offer even a portion of it back for God's use. Someone once said that the man who lives *by* himself and *for* himself is apt to be corrupted by the company he keeps. (Charles Parkhurst).

When life withdraws into itself, it becomes lonely, empty, unfulfilled—and frustration and anxiety breed and multiply relentlessly. Life only finds fulfillment when it *flows through* us, pouring forth into that cluster of people, things, places and events which are placed in our path by the Great Dreamer. If we grasp and hold onto people and things, clutching them to ourselves as possessions, God's great dreams for his vineyard cannot be fulfilled, and God will give his vineyard to others who will be faithful stewards, fully aware that they are tenants, not owners, of the vineyard.

What promise there lies in this flow of divine gift, placed in our care by our loving God! This potential, if we use it and nurture it, can become such a rich harvest! We are so blessed to participate in **God's** dream, for in so doing, the dreams of our own hearts, dreams placed into our hearts by God when we were still being formed in our mother's womb, the dreams of our own hearts are fulfilled as well! Yet if we choose to let that gift pass by unclaimed, it can become our life's hellish judgment, imploding upon us as we cut ourselves off from the flow of God's grace.

We too easily rationalize away our failure to seize such Life-giving opportunities, such divinely-inspired dreams. Opportunities to share in the Divine Dream are continually placed in our path and those opportunities **not** seized become for us our judgment. Through God's grace and forgiveness, a Divine opportunity once passed by may come again in a different guise, and we are given another chance to seize the Divine dream. We can welcome the ambassador, the mediator sent by God, or we can beat him and cast him out, perhaps even kill him. God gives us a second and a third chance, yet eventually he will allow us to choose to participate in his dream or to follow our own ambitions, forgetting the divine dreams planted in our very DNA.

In this world of which we are a part, how easy it is for us to get caught up in humanity's proud desires, and leave unfulfilled those Christ-centered Dreams which truly speak of Life. How vital it is to *reign in* our **selfish** dreams and *live out* the ramifications of God's Dreams in the practicalities of day-to-day living!

If we persist in rejecting the kingdom and the Lord's presence, the kingdom and divine presence will retreat from us. We *can* reject—we **do** reject; we *can* desert—we **do** desert. We have been given the freedom and the power to beat down and even kill the messengers of grace. (For God is the Great Allowor, as Richard Rohr says.) Yet we are **called** to manifest God's grace in each moment.

God's dreams need to be dreamed, God's visions need to be lived out—that you and I might know the fullness of God's love and grace, and that his kingdom may truly come on earth, as in heaven.

*Adapted in large part from a sermon by C. L. JOHNSON, onetime pastor of Fox Point Lutheran Church, Milwaukee*