

Sour Grapes

Matthew 21:33-46

I always think a little backstory is helpful in understanding the Scriptures we are exploring. In today's Scriptures, Jesus is once again being challenged by the religious leaders. They were quite upset that this itinerant rabbi was greeted loudly by the rabble as he arrived in Jerusalem before the celebration of the Passover. As if that wasn't enough to get their hackles up, he also made a huge scene in the Temple courts as he chased out all the vendors and moneychangers. The icing on the cake was that he preached with an authority that even the religious leaders themselves did not possess. In answer to their questions about where his authority came from, he answered with parables – including one about a landowner who planted a vineyard. It is this parable that we will reflect on this morning.

One of the struggles many people have in understanding Jesus' parables is knowing just what or who he is referencing. In today's parable the landowner is God. The tenants are the Israelite nation. The slaves sent to collect the rent are the prophets of God. And, of course, the beloved son is Jesus. Knowing the players may make it a bit easier to understand the message Jesus was relaying to the religious leaders. These were the people who had the greatest knowledge of the Scriptural prophecies

about Messiah, yet they did not make the connection to the man standing in front of them. So, Jesus breaks it down for them.

“There was a landowner.” In truth, God is the landowner of all Creation. He created the earth itself and everything in it that humans need to survive. From the Garden of Eden through the time of the Exodus, God had provided for his people. The well planted and watered vineyard reflects the lush land of Canaan where the Israelites eventually settled. Houses and crops were already there for their use and sustenance. He provided a hedge of protection from their enemies, as we read in the stories of the Judges. Yet, despite his care, the people grew cold in their devotion to God. Instead of reaping the promises of God, they earned the curses of God.

“When the harvest time approached.” After generations of neglect of the things of God, the time was approaching to reap the consequences of their rebellion. Time and again God had sent his messengers, the prophets, to warn the people of the coming punishment if they did not change their ways. These men of God were terribly mistreated – beaten, flogged, even killed because of the message they brought. After sending dozens of these messengers, and even forgiving his wayward children and returning them to their homeland, the Israelites once again returned to their neglectful ways, eventually finding themselves under Roman occupation.

“They will respect my son.” In any family business, the heirs are usually afforded the same respect and compliance as the owner himself. The landowner in this story had every reason to anticipate that the tenants would at least respect his son when he came to collect the rent. At this point, the tenants proved just how evil and unrepentant they were when they took the son outside the vineyard and killed him. Jesus in this way was foretelling his own death when the rabble would call for his crucifixion and he would be led out of Jerusalem to Golgotha to die.

“Therefore...what will the landowner do to those tenants?” If the religious leaders had been paying close attention, they would have recognized this form of parable as being the same as when Nathan confronted King David of his sin with Bathsheba. When David pronounced judgement on the rich man in the story of the rich man and the poor man’s lamb, Nathan responded with “You are that man!” Jesus’ response of, “have you never read in Scripture” about the cornerstone that was rejected by the builders, was his way of saying to the gathered leaders, “You are those men!”

“...the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.” Just as Nathan pronounced judgement on David, saying the sword would never leave the House of David, so Jesus pronounced judgement on the religious leaders. Those who recognized Jesus as the Messiah would take up the torch for God’s kingdom, it would be the birth of the church. Justice, mercy, and peace

would prevail. This message incensed the religious leaders who, like the evil tenants, plotted to arrest Jesus, but they waited for a more opportune time because they were afraid of the people, since the people thought of Jesus as a prophet.

In related verses from the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 5:1-7), we also hear about a vineyard.

My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit.
The vineyard of the LORD Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

A vineyard painstakingly planted and tended. A vineyard protected from predators and thieves. A vineyard that should have produced the finest grapes. Why then did it only produce bad fruit, sour grapes? Once again, the landowner is God, and the vineyard is the Israelite nation.

The vineyard was to produce justice and mercy, to bring joy to the heart of God. Instead, when God looked for justice, he found only bloodshed. When he looked for mercy, he heard only cries of distress. Because he found only sour grapes, grapes only good for being crushing underfoot, he would tear down the walls that protected the vineyard and allow it to be trampled as it deserved.

In the year 2023, it's easy to read these words and think, "Boy, those Israelites really messed up! They could have had it all and they ruined it." We need to remember that although these words were addressed to the Israelites, they also apply to those who inherited the vineyard after them. We are those people.

If God were to walk in our midst today, would he find the justice and mercy he sought from the evil tenants? As we read news story after news story of graft; gun violence; mistreatment of migrants, women, and those who are seen as somehow different; wars and threats of war in different quarters, can we really say we are any better? "Now wait a minute, Lynne!" you might say, "You're not saying I'm like that are

you?” No, I’m not. And when God pronounced his judgement on the Israelite nation there were those who *did* practice mercy and sought after justice, but their voices had become so small in number as to be almost unintelligible.

Today is World Communion Sunday, when Christians around the world will gather to share the elements of bread and wine and I find myself reminded of a favorite childhood story, Horton Hears a Who. If you are not familiar with the story, Horton is an elephant who is trying to protect a speck of dust that is home to the town of Whoville, populated by tiny Whos. The other animals in the Jungle of Nool, think Horton is crazy and harass him, steal the clover he has placed the speck of dust on for safety, and eventually threaten to boil in oil the tiny Whos, who they don’t believe exist. Horton asks the mayor of Whoville to have everyone on the speck of dust make noise in the hope of the other jungle animals hearing them. Despite everyone making noise, the villagers are still not heard. The mayor dashes door to door and eventually finds one little shirker, whom he carries to the top of the highest height in Whoville. When this little Who lets out a “Yopp!,” the other animals finally hear the Whos and then offer to help Horton protect them.

Why does World Communion Sunday make me think of Horton and the tiny Whos? Because today, Christians around the world join together in profound devotion to God. Our prayers and hymns joining us together in worship to let God know that we acknowledge His existence, that in a

world that has often turned its back on God, there are still people of his kingdom producing good grapes. We trust that He hears our “Yopp!” and will continue to protect and provide for his people as they strive to bring His heavenly kingdom here on earth, all around the globe.

Today we have the special joy of being able to join brothers and sisters from the other side of the globe in joint worship as we share communion with the ECR church at 11:30 today. I hope you will be staying to take part in this very special event.