

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 8, 2023
“Fruits of the Kingdom” (Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-46)

Our gospel for today places us somewhere in the middle of Holy Week. Jesus has entered triumphantly into the city of Jerusalem, driven the merchants and moneychangers out of the temple, and attracted the contempt of the religious leaders. Not happy with the things Jesus has said and done, things they would label as blasphemous, they confront Jesus as he teaches in the temple and demand to know on whose authority he has been acting.

Jesus responds with several parables. We heard the first one last week. A man went to his two sons, asking each to go work in the vineyard. The first said he would go, but didn't. The second refused to go, but changed his mind and went. Jesus ended by saying that the tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of heaven before the religious leaders. And if that weren't enough to get them good and stirred up, Jesus sets before them the parable of the wicked tenants, which is recorded in today's gospel. And if we paid attention to the first reading, we'll see how similar this parable is to that text.

Let's look at Isaiah first. Chapter five is referred to by many as Isaiah's love song: *Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard*. Israel was often referred to as God's vineyard. This song speaks to the relationship between God and Israel. According to Isaiah, God prepared a fertile hill on which to plant his vineyard. The soil was good and rich. God himself had dug into the ground and cleared it of stones, preparing it beforehand. When he finished, God planted the vines, and not just any vines, mind you, but the choicest vines – healthy and of good stock. He then put a hedge around the vineyard, perhaps to prevent animals from grazing over or eating the plants before they had a chance to grow and mature. In the middle, he built a watchtower to keep an eye on the vineyard so that no one could sneak in to steal the fruit or do damage to it. Then, in anticipation of a good crop of grapes, he dug out a place for the grapes to be placed after they were picked, a vat where the workers could stomp them to bring out their sweet juices.

After everything was in place, God reflected on everything he had done and concluded with great satisfaction and confidence: *What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?* This vineyard had everything necessary to produce wonderful fruit of the vine; everything it needed to produce the finest of wines that would lift the spirit and make the heart glad like no other wine could ever do.

But God was disappointed at the outcome of it all. Instead of the excellent grapes it was supposed to yield, it produced only wild grapes. They were bitter when they should have been sweet, small and dry when should have been plump and juicy. Now the owner (God) reflected on his vineyard with great sadness and disappointment. He was forced to take action. He removed its hedge and knocked down its wall so that it might be devoured. He stopped irrigating it by commanding the clouds to drop no rain on it. In short, he cut his losses, threw in the towel and abandoned it.

Isaiah then offers an interpretation so that everyone gets the point. The vineyard of God is the house of Israel and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting. The fruit he hoped the people of Judah would produce were justice and righteousness, but all he got were bloodshed and outcry. They were like wild grapes. Instead of justice, they had shed innocent blood. Instead of righteousness, they were motivated by their pride, selfishness and greed, and had done what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord. So God tore down its protective wall and left it vulnerable. Pretty soon the nation of Babylon trampled Israel (God's vineyard) and forced God's people into exile.

When Jesus tells his parable, it is obvious that he developed it from Isaiah's love song. *There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower.* He continues by telling us that the landowner leased his vineyard to tenants before going away. The tenants did not own the vineyard in which they worked. Nor did they own the fruit it produced. They were merely sharecroppers who had entered into an agreement with the owner to give him a portion of the harvested grapes.

At harvest time, the owner sent his slaves to collect his portion of the produce. But the tenants would not acknowledge their obligation. Instead they became greedy and mean-spirited. *Let us make the vineyard our own,* they said to one another. So, not only did they deny the owner the rent he was due, but they beat, stoned, and even killed the slaves the owner had sent. The landowner then sent a larger delegation of slaves, but the same thing happened. Finally, he sent his son, thinking they would receive him in the same manner they would receive the landowner, himself. But the tenants saw this as an opportunity to obtain the son's inheritance. So they seized him, took him out of the vineyard, and killed him, as well. That's when the owner, himself, went to the vineyard. He put the wicked tenants to death and leased the vineyard to other tenants who would honor the lease agreement.

Again, the landowner in the parable is God and the vineyard is Israel. However, the tenants are the religious leaders, the ones put in charge by God to safeguard all that is his and to protect the way of life God desires for all his children. The religious leaders knew the law well, but they did not know the heart of God. They became misguided. As a result the people were led astray. They became corrupt, abandoned the ways and will of God, and refuses to acknowledge God's authority.

But here is where Jesus' parable takes a different turn than Isaiah's. We get a wonderful picture of God's patience and his desire for his people to turn to him again. Instead of cutting his losses and throwing in the towel, the landowner sent his servants to collect what was rightfully his. These servants were the many prophets God sent to warn Israel that she was on a slippery slope and headed for disaster. But the prophets were treated cruelly, stoned, and killed. Finally, the landowner sent his own son. Surely, when the workers saw the perseverance and patience of the owner, they would come to their senses, be ashamed of their behavior, repent, and give the son the fruits of justice and righteousness he had come for. But they killed him, as well.

This, of course, needs no interpretation. By the end of the week, the religious leaders (the tenants in charge of the vineyard) would take the Father's Son (Jesus) outside the city walls and crucify him. And what should become of the wicked tenants? Ironically, the religious leaders themselves

answer this question: *Those miserable wretches should be put to a miserable death and the vineyard left to other tenants who will give the landowner the produce at harvest.*

This parable has several points of emphasis. The first point is about restoration. Ever since the Fall from Paradise, God has been trying to bring us, his people, back into a healthy and loving relationship with him. He clothed Adam and Eve. He protected Cain. He made a promise after the flood. He blessed Abraham. And he sent prophets over and over again in an attempt to call us home. Eventually, he sent his only Son to redeem us from sin and death and to make us heirs of everlasting life. God has done everything to restore our relationship with him.

The second point is about trust. God planted the vineyard, built the fence and watchtower, and dug the wine press. Then he entrusted us to produce good fruit – namely justice and righteousness.

Justice means looking out for one another. It means protecting the weak and helpless so that the strong and powerful don't take advantage of them. It is making sure every individual is respected and given the same opportunities in life. God desires that we work to make sure that every person has value.

Producing righteousness means not only doing what is right, but doing the right thing with pure motives. It is obeying the commands of God to love God and neighbor. It is serving God and neighbor for the benefit of neighbor – not for the benefit of ourselves.

Justice and righteousness come from a pure heart and a right mind, the things that produce the good fruit God desires. God gives us all we need for the task. He doesn't stand over us and tell us how to do it. God simply trusts us to go into the vineyard – a vineyard he has lovingly provided – with the sole purpose of helping God restore the relationship that was broken so long ago.

The third point has to do with accountability. Just as the landowner sent messenger after messenger, and finally his own son, God gives us chance after chance to produce good fruit. And one day, we will be held accountable. One day, we will have to answer to God for how we've used the gifts he has entrusted to us in the building up of his kingdom. The gospel tells us that the kingdom will be given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. If we aren't producing justice and righteousness, that's a dismal picture for us, isn't it? Fortunately for us, the landowner (God) is patient and long-suffering. This is the final point of the parable. We are given another chance. We can come to the Lord's table and repent of our sin – both what we have done and what we have left undone – knowing that in Christ we are forgiven and given another chance to be faithful tenants who are a blessing to others. Thanks be to God. Amen.