

In the Vineyards of Life

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Sermon at New Song Episcopal Church

October 8, 2023

This morning, we get even *more* parables about vineyards. Are you tired of them yet? Three weeks ago, it was the story of the laborers who worked different amounts of time in a vineyard, yet each were given the same pay. Last week Jesus told a story about two brothers who were sent into the vineyard by their father to work. One refused to go at first and then went, while the other said he would go and then didn't. And this week we have yet another vineyard story, the most difficult of them all.

A landowner has left his vineyard in the care of tenants. At harvest time, he sends three slaves to collect the produce, only to have them beaten, killed and stoned by the tenants. He sends more slaves, and they are treated the same way. Finally he sends his son, thinking that they will respect him much more than slaves, but instead the son is killed.

Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, Jesus asks his followers, what will he do to those tenants? The people answer: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants."

Well, this certainly isn't Jesus meek and mild, but instead Jesus in judgment mode.

In thinking about this parable, it's been helpful to have some historical background courtesy of the series that some of us have been watching on Zoom over the past few months. *Searching for the Historical Jesus* is led by Biblical scholar Jean-Pierre Isbouts, who gives a fascinating tour through the historical and cultural context of the Gospels.

Some of the most surprising things we've learned have been about the province of Galilee. In Jesus' time, as it is today, Galilee was the fertile garden of Israel, the major source of food for a dry region. It was also a political pawn for both Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire, a place squeezed harder and harder for taxes that went to fund Roman ambitions and building projects for King Herod. Much of the land came under the ownership of absentee landlords, while the people who actually did the work became poorer and poorer.

Hearing about this complex political situation has made me aware of the delicate balancing act that Jesus had to negotiate as he expanded his ministry. The players in the region included the corrupt Jewish royal court, Jewish religious authorities jealous of their status and power, and the brutal Roman occupiers who oversaw everything.

With all of this as background, these vineyard parables take on added meaning. Jesus knew intimately the problems of vineyards. He knew the workers, the owners, and the difficult economic and political situations of the province. It's no wonder he used vineyards again and again in his teaching stories.

Even today, we have more connections to the concept of vineyards than we may realize. If you're Mel Schlachter, you value them for the grapes that you can make into wine. They resonate for me, too, because as a farmer's daughter I grew up on my own version of a vineyard. And I remember my dad's stories of his childhood during the Depression, when he and his family moved nine times in 16 years. Having lost their original farm, they became Iowa sharecroppers, hired hands on someone else's land.

I think, too, of Jennifer Masada, who served as a priest here before being called to a church in Hawaii. When her Japanese-American father was a child, he and his family were sent to an internment camp during World War II. They had to leave behind their vineyard in California, where they grew grapes that were turned into raisins. When the Masada family was released after several years in an internment camp, they discovered that their neighbors had bought the property—not to keep for themselves, but to keep it in trust for them. During the years the Masadas were gone, their neighbors tended the grapes and saved the profits, so that when the family returned, they received not only their land back, but also had money to restart their lives again.

I think if Jesus were here today, he'd tell a parable about the Masada vineyard, about tenants who were extraordinarily *responsible* stewards.

Which brings us back to the parable told in the Gospel for today, which concerns tenants who were most certainly **not** good stewards. Unfortunately, in Jesus' time and today, their wickedness is far more common than the generosity of those California tenants.

Clearly Jesus is making a dramatic and ominous point in this parable, one in direct opposition to the religious authorities of his day. They have not been good stewards of the vineyard of Israel. They have stolen what is not theirs. And in a chilling foreshadowing of his own crucifixion, Jesus says they will even kill the landowner's son.

But what does this parable mean for us **today**? What message does it have for us, in a time far removed from its original context?

One thing we can do is see ourselves as characters in this story. We might think of times when we have been treated unjustly, as the slaves are in the parable, and we can take comfort in Jesus' recalling of these lines from Psalm 118:

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes.

The words promise vindication for those who have been abused. Now that's a satisfying ending to the story.

Or, alternatively, we can put ourselves into the role of the wicked tenants, which is an entirely different kettle of fish. In doing so, we might ask ourselves: When have we been greedy and have

taken what isn't ours? When have we refused to pay what was due? When have we killed the messenger, so to speak, because it was a message we didn't want to hear?

These are much harder questions, of course, because they ask us to acknowledge our need for repentance. All of us know, deep down, of all the ways in which we have fallen short and of how we have benefitted from systems that exploit others.

In this parable, Jesus is calling the religious authorities of his day to turn from their wicked ways and repent before it is too late. His story is a warning of judgement to come.

And I think Jesus is warning us too. He is reminding us that we also occupy vineyards owned by God. Nothing we think we own is ours to keep. The homes in which we live will one day be occupied by other people. The gardens we've planted, the walls we've painted, the furniture that fills our rooms—all of it will one day be gone.

No matter how tightly we hold on to the things of this life, eventually they will slip through our fingers. And that includes not only our property and money, but also our careers, relationships, friendships, marriages, and children.

This past week I had the chance to visit with a friend who has recently received a diagnosis of dementia. She's in the early stages of her illness, and we had a lovely visit, but it's clear where the train she's on is heading. She said that her doctor has told her and her husband that they should make the best of the next two or three years. That's a short time indeed to pack in all that they had hoped to do together in retirement.

I think of that poignant conversation as I reflect on the vineyard that is my own life—all of the plans, commitments, pleasures and relationships that fill my time.

It's so easy to go through our days thinking it's all ours. It's so easy to forget who is the real owner of our days.

So maybe the best lesson we can take from this perplexing and harsh parable is a reminder that we are all stewards of vineyards owned by God. And we can ask ourselves: Are we producing good fruit? And do we give God what is owed to him? And do we remember that we will eventually have to give an account of all that was given to us?

These are things to think about as we labor in our vineyards.

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