

DANGER IN THE VINEYARD

by

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October 2, 2011

(Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



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Texts: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; and Matthew 21:33-46

Matthew 21:33-46

“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.

³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.

³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way.

³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’

³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’

³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

⁴¹They 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.”

⁴²Jesus 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’?

⁴³Therefore 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. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Andrew Greely, author and priest, wrote, “If anyone wishes to eliminate uncertainty, tension, confusion and disorder from one’s life, there is no point getting mixed up with Jesus of Nazareth.”

Interesting. Sometimes our image of Jesus is that he is a mild-mannered fellow, not wanting to offend anyone. The only thing wrong with that image is that it

doesn't come from the New Testament. Jesus is more interested in justice and righteousness than not wanting to offend anyone. Following Jesus can be a hard road sometimes. We all really know that. We like to avoid it if we can. But Jesus is not really just a defender of the status quo. No, he seems to think that life on earth ought to reflect the intention of God, and it usually doesn't do that, does it?

Over the last three weeks, we've had three vineyard parables from Jesus, and we could say there is danger in the vineyard. Two weeks ago, we had the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. Some laborers work all day and some work only an hour or two. Yet, at the end of the day, they all get paid the same wage. That is offensive to people like most of us who think we've worked harder and therefore deserve more. Last week the vineyard parable was about two workers, both sons of the landowner. One said he would work in the vineyard, but didn't. One said, no, he wouldn't work in the vineyard, but he did. Again, confusion concerning laborers in the vineyard. Who is the authentic laborer and who shares in the benefits?

Today's vineyard parable is often referred to as the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. An absentee landowner planted a vineyard and then leased it out to tenants. At harvest time, the landowner sent his slaves to collect his share. However, the tenants beat some of the slaves and killed one. When other slaves were sent, the same thing happened again. Finally, the landowner sends his son to collect the harvest, but the son is also killed, so that the tenants might have all of the produce for themselves. There is danger in the vineyard.

Jesus then asks those listening to the story to participate in its ending. "What will the landowner do?" he asks his audience. They reply, based on the ways of the world, "He will put those tenants to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." Jesus then indicates that this parable is about him and the prophets who have come before him and the way the covenant community has treated them.

Remember, this is one Jew, Jesus, talking to other Jews. It is also important to remember the context. This is near the end. Jesus has entered Jerusalem after spending most of his ministry in Galilee and beyond. This is show-down week. In a few

days there will be a trial and Jesus will be dead. There is indeed danger in the vineyard. Jesus has confronted the leaders of the faith community with a lack of faithfulness in their responsibility of justice and righteousness. There has been a misuse of privilege and responsibility.

Actually, it is a very similar story to one found in Isaiah, Chapter 5, which no doubt formed the basis of this parable for Jesus. Isaiah refers to Israel as the vineyard of the Lord. The Lord expects the vineyard to produce grapes, but it has produced wild grapes in Isaiah's prophetic imagery. Isaiah plainly says, the Lord, the owner of the vineyard, expected justice but saw bloodshed. He expected righteousness, but got a cry from the needy. There is a problem in the vineyard.

Jesus' parable becomes even more powerful when you remember the context. He is in Jerusalem. Everybody knew the confrontation with the religious and secular authorities was bound to happen. Everybody would have thought of Isaiah's prophetic words when they heard Jesus' parable. It's all right there in the story. The people understood what was going on and so did the chief priests and Pharisees, the leaders of the faith community. The people regarded Jesus as a prophet, that is to say that he expected justice and righteousness from all people, but especially from those who had the responsibility of leadership. Both Jesus and Isaiah indicate there will be consequences for actions.

We talked about the texts for today at the Wednesday morning Men's Bible Study this week, as we always talk about the texts for the week. The first reading for today, as you will note, is the Ten Commandments. Both of these passages talk about expectations and consequences.

After the breakfast, Brad Harmes told me a story about his little nephew. The little boy is somewhat of a rounder. A typical little boy, he will get by with what he can, push a boundary here, go over the line there. His mother, on the other hand, tries to keep him in line and on the straight and narrow. One day when Brad's nephew had gotten over the line and done something he shouldn't have done, his mother said to him, "You do that again and there will be consequences."

The little boy thought for a minute and said, "What are the consequences?"

In a perfect revelation of human nature, the nephew was discerning how much he could get by with before the consequences made it not worth it. That's pretty much us, isn't it? We know the context of the parable in today's reading. Those charged with the leadership of the faith community were more concerned about preserving the status quo than they were with justice, more concerned with themselves than they were with those in need. And there was danger in the vineyard for all of the players. Certainly there was danger for Jesus for saying such things.

In a few days, he would be hung on a cross and killed. There was danger for the chief priests and Pharisees. They could feel the wrath of the crowd. But more than anything perhaps, there was danger for a society whose leaders cared not for justice and righteousness.

Now we know the original context and meaning. What might this passage be saying to us today? What are the consequences? That if you don't do the right thing, God will come and get you. Maybe. That just having conversation about justice and righteousness can be emotional and dangerous. History bears that out. Maybe the message is that the vineyard doesn't work very well unless everyone does what is right and does their part.

Rev. Jim Wallis spoke at Rice University this week. Some of you were there. One of his themes was finding a way for America today to find some common ground for all of our perspectives and constituents in a very diverse country now. It is a theme that I try to work for as well. So, after the event, I had an opportunity to ask Rev. Wallis how you do that. How do you help people amidst the diversity that we have in American right now to find some common ground that we all share. He said, you can't just tell people to find common ground. You have to demonstrate that there already is common ground, if we just acknowledge it. We do share a lot in common. Our futures are bound together. Everyone must have a place at the table.

In a few weeks, members of our congregation will gather in neighborhoods on a Friday night to share a meal and a place at the table. We call it Fellowship Friday. I hope you are able to attend the gathering in your neighborhood. It is important for us to share a place at the table with each other.

But in a sense, it is symbolic of what needs to happen all across our nation, people sharing a meal and conversation and discovering common ground.

Today of course is World Communion Sunday, when Christians all over the world recognize that we share common ground in Christ. From tiny huts to great cathedrals, people of all colors and ethnicities share a common meal today.

We all know today that there is danger in the vineyard, whether the vineyard is just our faith community or our nation or the wider world. All of us who are laborers in the vineyard must do our part and live with justice and righteousness, that is to say, do the right thing in our own lives and in relationship to others, or, as Jesus says, there will be consequences.