

Lectionary 27A Pr 22
October 4, 2020
Grace Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL

Psalm 19
Ex 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Phil. 3:4b-14
Matt 21:33-46

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Parables were a significant way in which Jesus taught his followers and the crowds then and now. They typically used imagery common to those listening – fishing nets, mustard seeds, sons, lamps on lampstands, housewives, leaven, salt, and oh so many more. Vineyards were common in the land in which Jesus lived and that's why he used that imagery in so many of his parables and in his teaching. Jesus used the common and ordinary to teach mysterious and extraordinary things.

Parables are sometimes a bit like riddles and we think that if we could just understand who stands for what and what stands for which, then we can unlock the meaning. And some parables are like that. But many more are rather like an amazing sculpture that we look at from various vantage points and see different things. Today's gospel reading is one in a series of three that Jesus spoke in the presence of the religious leaders of the day. Last week's was a story about two sons (a theme that is very common throughout Scripture) and which of the two did the will of their father in working the family vineyard. Next week's is the story of a wedding banquet and the unlikely guests and how they were received.

Today's gospel reading is about a vineyard that was carefully tended not by the servants or farmworkers, but by the landowner himself. And while we could plumb the depths of this parable and marvel at its intricacies, there are two things that I would like to zero in on today.

The first is the nature of the owner of the vineyard. The owner was very deliberate and intentional with regard to his vineyard. He planted it, tended it, protected it, built a watchtower for it and then planned for its ongoing care by engaging others who would work in it, likely a what we understand in our country as share-cropping. When the time came for the fruit to be harvested, he sent servants to collect the portion of the fruit that was his. But the vineyard workers would not yield what was the owner's and treated the workers violently, killing two and beating the third. When notified of this, the owner dispatched another group who were treated the same. When the owner heard of this, finally he sent his very own son to those working the vineyard. And the son was killed by the workers.

It would be easy to make this parable about the workers and the evil that they did – and, it would not even be wrong to consider this. But, the bigger question is -- What landowner would do this sort of thing? You see, first and foremost, this parable is about the vineyard owner – this one who fervently and repeatedly reached out to those tending the vineyard – even to the point of sending his son. This one who consistently sought relationship over entitlement. This one who did not send the authorities to right this situation but sent his own flesh and blood. This one who, at great cost, pursued relationship. This One who is God who persistently and consistently seeks out and creates relationship with us and all of God's people.

The second thing I would like us to focus on today is what the owner sent his servants to collect – the owner sent them to collect the fruit of the harvest, the produce of the field from the sharecroppers who had functioned as a type of steward of the owner’s vineyard. The owner retains ownership and receives a portion of the produce. And the stewards live off that which remains.

A steward does not claim ownership of, control over, or any of the prerogatives of entitlement. A steward manages that which is entrusted to her. A steward tends to that which is put in his charge. A steward seeks the best for the one who has entrusted them with so much. The fall season brings with it themes and images of harvest and gratitude and stewardship. So I would like you to think about your life as a vineyard. Or perhaps as a worker in the vineyard. And the harvest, the fruit comes after a season of work. We often speak of the “fruit of one’s labors.” What is the fruit of our life in this season? What is expected of us with regard to this fruit?

I have some friends who traveled to the wine country of California. I saw the photos that they posted of the vineyards they visited. The beauty and calm of these images belie the work and effort and beneath-the-surface activity making this vineyard productive. And that is true of any garden or even any endeavor we may undertake. In order to reap a harvest or yield a result, we must tend the vineyard with careful attention. If our endeavor is an academic degree, we must study. If we want to learn a new skill or profession, we must learn and practice.

So, I ask you, How is it that you are cultivating the vineyard of your life – of your soul – of your very being? And how is that going for you? Is this a time of cultivation and turning the soil? Or is it a time of quiet waiting for a growing season to come? Is it a time of fruit-bearing? Or is it one of those dreaded times of pruning? Or is it a time of receiving nourishment? Or, most likely, is it a time of some combination of all the above?

And, how is it that we are cultivating our life together here at Grace, even in the midst of a pandemic? What new ways are we finding or creating to be a community of the faithful? How is it that the soil is being nourished, that new shoots are emerging, that fruit is growing, that produce is being harvested.

We don’t do this alone. We do it together and we do it with Jesus in our midst. And we do this imperfectly. There are weeds, some times of inattention, some times in which we may despair that we are not doing well enough or are making mistakes. And that may indeed be the case. We may judge ourselves and others harshly and uncharitably.

Hear these words of theologian, Frederick Buechner, “The one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.” Read that again and let it sink into your being.

Yes, this one who sent his very own Son into our midst to be with us as we are empowered and enlivened by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God!