

Matthew 21.33-46; Isaiah 5.1-7
October 4, 2026, Pentecost + 19

Rev. Pauline Farrington
Trinity, North Bethesda

(Scripture texts are posted at the bottom of the document.)

From God's cherished garden,
God expects justice
but sees bloodshed.
God expects righteousness
but hears a cry.

Isaiah sees a vision about
Jerusalem and Judah.
And he tells it to the kings of Judah.
In the vision of the vineyard,
God brings a lawsuit against the leaders
of this society.
They have failed in their duty
to ensure justice for all people
and to care for those in need.

In the chapters surrounding today's reading
it's clear that Isaiah is speaking
to a very affluent society who,
though they are attentive to worship
and their well ordered rituals,
it's all hypocrisy.
There is complete lack of concern
for those who are oppressed and poor,
those who are vulnerable,
marginalized, and forgotten.

To the elders and princes of Judah the indictment is made:
"It is you who have devoured the vineyard;
the spoil of the poor is in your houses.
What do you mean by crushing my people,
by grinding the face of the poor?"
And to the people God says, "O my people,
your leaders mislead you,
and confuse you."

God has appointed human beings

to the position of
 stewarding the earth and her people.
 And God gave us guidelines
 of how to be *just* stewards
 acting in righteousness —
 right relationship with all creation,
 human and other than human.
 God hears all the suffering cries
 that come from our failure in that stewardship.

God expects justice
 but sees bloodshed.
 God expects righteousness
 but hears a cry.

God invites the hearer into the story
 with a tender love song about
 a beloved vintner
 who lovingly
 cultivates, nurtures, and protects
 a cherished garden
 expecting a harvest of good grapes
 that is equal to the care
 that's been given.
 This vintner waits in anticipation
 of filling the wine vat —
 only to be heartbroken that it yields
 only rotten grapes.
 And what began as a tender love song
 becomes the lament of a broken heart.

God asks the people of Judah
 to be the judge
 only to discover that the people themselves
 are the ones being judged.
 Biblical literature can be tricky!
 It can reveal things about us
 we don't necessarily want revealed!

And that's what Jesus does in his parable
 of the vineyard owner and tenants.
 At first he makes a direct connection
 to this parable from Isaiah —

a landowner plants a vineyard,
puts a fence around it,
digs a winepress,
and builds a watchtower.

Then Jesus deviates.

Unlike Isaiah's parable,
the *vineyard* isn't the problem.
It's the *tenants*,
the ones who have been appointed
as stewards to tend, nurture,
and care for the vineyard.

When the owner of the vineyard
sends representatives
to collect the owner's share
of the produce,
the tenants do violence
and even kill the representatives.

The landowner, with great
patience and grace,
sends a second envoy —
only to have the wretched tenants
do the same thing again.

Finally the landowner sends the heir,
the one who will inherit the whole vineyard,
thinking the tenants will have more respect.
And sure enough,
they kill the heir thinking they might
take the vineyard for themselves.

The landowner expects *justice*
but sees bloodshed.

The landowner expects righteousness
but hears a cry.

Suddenly Jesus turns to
the chief priests and elders,
(the leaders of the people),
and he asks them to adjudicate,
as if to say, "what do you think?
if you were the owner
and your tenants killed your child,
what would you do?"

Well. As we would expect,
 they say, "Those wretches deserve to die!
 The owner
 should lease the vineyard
 to other tenants who will deal *justly*."

The chief priests and elders
 put it together that he's talking about them.
 They know the original parable from Isaiah
 a parable of judgment against the leaders.
 Jesus lets them pass judgment
 on themselves.
 And sure enough (he tells them)
 it will happen just as they say.
 God's cherished garden
 will be taken out of your hands
 and placed with people
 who will bear the fruit
 that God expects."

Now, a caution is in order here.
 It would be easy
 (and it has been in the history of the church)
 for us to say,
 "Yep! Those Jews are the bad tenants.
 So God took the vineyard
 away from them
 and gave it to us Christians!"
 But that's not
 what Jesus is saying, *at all*!
 It's not what Isaiah is saying either.
 Jesus and Isaiah are talking
 to the *leaders*,
 the elders,
 the ones who are appointed
 as stewards of God's
 cherished people of Israel
 (and by extrapolation,
 the people of the whole world).

The people are the vineyard.
 The leaders, throughout history,
 are the ones who fail in their duty

to ensure justice for all people
and to care for those in need.

And just so we *clearly* see
our own culpability in all this,
listen to Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel translation:
[Jesus says,] "Listen. I'm telling you that the
God Movement will be taken out of your hands
and tuned over to people who will be productive.
And the ministers and church people listened
to his parables and realized that [the parables]
were aimed at them."

God has appointed us as stewards
of God's justice and righteousness.

We, church people and ministers,
must listen to this living word,
this judgment,
that is spoken to us today
and ask ourselves,
is justice flourishing in our land?
Is righteousness flourishing
on Earth?
Or do we see bloodshed?
Do we hear suffering cries?

This judgment is hard to hear.
It's a powerful stone,
(to use Jesus' metaphor),
it's the stone which we *often reject*.

Jesus says that the one who
falls on this stone will be
broken to pieces and crushed.
Yes. It's a Word that will break us,
and yet
it's also the very Word
that heals us.
It's the cornerstone on which God builds
a world of justice
and righteousness.

Isaiah 5:1-7**Matthew 21:33-46**

[Jesus said:] ³³ "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went away.

¹ I will sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.

² He dug it and cleared it of stones
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded rotten grapes.

³ And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah, judge between me
and my vineyard.

⁴ What more was there to do for my
vineyard that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield rotten grapes?

⁵ And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.

⁶ I will make it a wasteland;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown
with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

⁷ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his cherished garden;
he expected justice
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness
but heard a cry!

³⁴ When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵ But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Then he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹ They 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."

⁴² Jesus 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'?

⁴³ "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits. ⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

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