

While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season October 4, 2020 – 18th Sunday after Pentecost

We continue in the 'green' season of Pentecost, following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve's message for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

Lessons for Pentecost 18

Psalm 80, Phil. 3b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

Shortly after Noah and his family got off the ark and began to reestablish themselves, we read this in Genesis 9: "Noah a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard." When God's prophet is trying to convince the Jewish people to return from their exile in Babylon to the land of promise, he shares this word from God: "I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy ... I will delight in my people ... they shall build houses and inhabit them, they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit."

The people of Jesus's day knew vineyards. They lived among them. They walked by them. They worked in them. They enjoyed the fruit from them. It was easy, though, to take vineyards for granted. Just part of the landscape. Most of us do not live among vineyards – I had to drive some distance to find a vineyard to film the opening to today's worship video. Many of us do live near farms. We pass fields – fields of corn, fields of grain, fields of soybeans. We likely do not think too much about the farms that we pass – what goes on there, how the farmer manages the farm, what happens to the produce. Yes, just part of the landscape.

For the third week in a row, Jesus has taken us into the vineyard landscape with a parable. The parables give us a glimpse into the inner workings of a vineyard, but there is something more that Jesus has in mind by highlighting a vineyard in his parables.

From the beginning, a vineyard has been a tangible symbol connecting God's people to the land. A vineyard requires care and attention. A vineyard requires patience. A vineyard means you are in for the long haul. A vine will not produce fruit in the first year. A vine that is not pruned and cared for will not produce abundantly. A vineyard is connected with settling a land – for literally putting roots down in a land. So, yes, we are told way back in the book of Genesis, that Noah, fresh off the boat, sets out to establish a vineyard. So, yes, God's assurance to reluctantly returning exiles is that they will plant vineyards and eat the fruit. The prophet Isaiah had long before described God's gift of the land of promise to the people as a vineyard. But on that occasion, Isaiah was confronting people with their shortcomings as stewards of God's vineyard – the vineyard, he said, was producing wild grapes! A result that would lead to God dismantling that vineyard and exile for God's people. Our Psalm today, recalls the words of Isaiah, as it pleads: 'visit the vine and protect it.'

All this is the backdrop to Jesus' third vineyard parable today. The importance of vineyards to the people of his day – importance for food and livelihood, and the importance of the vineyard as a symbol of God's being rooted with the people in their lives.

One more thing before entering today's vineyard parable: Do you notice that Jesus' tone and demeanor is changing in these past couple weeks. He is getting closer to the Cross, he is getting closer to those who will try to deflect him from his mission. He still has some things, some hard things to say and teach.

Jesus' parable today is full of horror and violence. It starts out gently enough with the picture of a landowner, who establishes the vineyard – does all the things necessary – providing a protective fence, a wine press, a watchtower. Having established the vineyard, the landowner

leases the vineyard to tenants. The time comes for the rent (a portion of the produce) to be paid. This is where we see the evilness of the tenants. The parable has been aptly named, “The Parable of the Wicked Tenants”. The wicked tenants beat, kill and stone the first set of the landowner’s servants who come to collect. They do the same to the next set of servants. Finally, the landowner says, “surely they will respect my son.” So, he sends his son to the wicked tenants. They quickly devise an evil scheme to kill the son so they will get the vineyard as an inheritance. They kill the landowner’s son! As we hear this parable, we might be wondering, where is this parable going? How will Jesus end this parable with a message that will guide and inspire us?

Jesus continues . . . “Now when the landowner of the vineyard comes . . . We are now hanging on every word – how will things turn out for the tenants, the landowner, the vineyard in this parable? We are hanging on every word, but Jesus’ next words do not end the parable; he offers no words to end the story of the landowner with the dead son, killed by wicked tenants. No, there is no ending. Instead, Jesus poses a question: “When the landowner comes, what will he do to those tenants?” The listeners get the chance to pick the ending for this story. They do not hesitate: “the landowner will put those wretches to a miserable death, lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him produce at the harvest.” Was there any other ending possible to bring justice, to bring vindication, to make the listener feel better about the parable?

Jesus does not affirm their answer nor the judgment contained in their answer. Instead, Jesus quotes scripture – 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.” Jesus’ scripture quote suggests that this is not just a parable about an earthly vineyard. This is a story of rejection, evil rejection, stubborn rejection that is, indeed, part of our earthly, human story. Rejecting this landowner, refusing to give the fruits of this vineyard, is a story of God’s people. But by quoting Psalm 118, Jesus makes it clear that rejection is not the last word in the story of God’s people. This is, after all, God’s story; we work in God’s vineyard and God will have the last word no matter what we might reject. God will take what is rejected and build. God will use what is rejected and make it the cornerstone of a new structure, a new vineyard – God’s kingdom.

Jesus set us up with this parable. We naturally focus on the wickedness of the tenants. We focus on how we can turn that wickedness back on them. This parable is not about those rejecting tenants, this is about the landowner who will not be daunted by such wickedness in establishing a vineyard that produces fruit. This is about the landowner who sets the terms of life in the vineyard. This is about God who gives new life to the vineyard.

We might be familiar with the words that Jesus quotes today. Psalm 118 is the Psalm for Easter Sunday. We hear these words each year as we rejoice and celebrate again the resurrection of our Lord. Yes, we see so clearly Jesus when we hear the words in the parable today: “the stone that the builders rejected”. We know that Jesus is the cornerstone of the church! (Since we are all at in the privacy of our homes, take a moment and sing that familiar verse: “The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord; she is his new creation by water and the word.”)

It’s chapter 21 of Matthew and Jesus is well on the way to the Cross. He knows there are those on the periphery of his parable-telling today, the chief priests and Pharisees who have rejected him. He knows what lies ahead for them. They understand that Jesus is talking about them. They understand that their stewardship of the vineyard, God’s vineyard, is in danger of ending. God is about to establish a kingdom with Jesus – crucified and raised – as the cornerstone.

God is about to establish a fruitful vineyard with Jesus, the vine. Jesus said, “I am the true vine, my father is the winegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every

branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” At the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, John told us: “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” We produce fruits for the kingdom when we come before God acknowledging that we have been part of the rejecting crowd. We have lived with the fruits of God’s kingdom and treated them as if they were just part of the landscape. We have failed to give God thanks for blessings, one clear way to show that we reject them. We have failed to share God’s blessings, another way to reject them. We have not taken our love of God into the other vineyards of our lives – our families, our workplaces, our schools, our communities. God intends for the vineyard established in Jesus to bear fruit. We know that God is patient and never stops calling people into the vineyard, calling people back into the vineyard. It is never too late in the day for anyone to come into God’s vineyard and be part of the fruit- harvesting team.

I want to again close my sermon with words from Paul. Paul recounted all the good fruits he had produced in his life but he realized that without Christ in his life, they fell short. Once led to God’s vineyard, Paul has a different perspective:

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord ... that being found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Words from one worker in God’s vineyard to us; we are co-workers with Paul and all God’s saints in the vineyard where we are connected with God. AMEN