

Sermon
Matthew 21:33-42
16th Sunday after Pentecost • Sunday, October 4, 2020
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

I don't know much about vineyards except for the single row of concord grapes which grew along the fence by the corner of the garage, in front on the barn in Southern California where I grew up. The grapes had been planted by my grandparents sometime in the forties and as far as I can remember, they were just there.

In some years, my sister and I tended large gardens between that fence and the barn – tomatoes, zucchini, eggplant, peppers and so on. But no one ever thought to care for the grapes. They were just there, providing a growing screen that covered the chain link fence. The grapes, in years when there were any, were not very tasty, and there wasn't ever very many of them. Maybe if we had given these grapes more than an afterthought...

This parable, because it focuses on those who tend to it, makes me think of the destruction of the prized vineyards in the Napa Valley, so many of which have been destroyed this week by the raging fires in Northern California. Because vineyards do not happen overnight, but are the result of many, many years of cultivation and care. These vineyards, of course, are symbols of abundance where God's gifts and human hands join together to co-create delicious things which sustain and enhance our lives.

But in rereading today's text, I come away with a different thought. I hate to say it, but I kind of think Matthew's kind of a troublemaker. Yes, I know, we're not supposed to say stuff like that. But still, I can't help it. Just recall today's parable for instance.

The trouble doesn't all start here, of course, but in this week's gospel and in the weeks to come, we're going to hear Matthew relate some pretty dark things. More than that, we're going to hear Matthew use these things to try to win the argument he's having with the Pharisees, as both he and the Pharisees compete for the Jewish community's faithfulness. Matthew's goal is to appeal to the Jewish people so that they'll convert to Christianity, and the Pharisees just want the Jews to stay Jews.

So, in this week's reading, Matthew has Jesus telling a parable that plays off the familiar imagery of the vineyard and how unfaithful the managers of the vineyard are. He hopes, that upon hearing it, the Pharisees will be humiliated and at the same time, to score some points with the Jewish community.

You know the story. A landowner plants a vineyard, surrounds it with a fence, puts in a wine press, a lookout tower, and does everything else he will need to gather in a decent harvest. Then he leases it to tenants to run things while he goes away. When the harvest comes in, he sends his servants to collect his portion of the profits, the share that is owed to him. But the tenants beat, stone, and even kill his servants.

When he sends more, the same thing happens.

And so then he sends his son and the brutes kill him as well, hoping that if there's no heir, and the landlord remains out of the country until he dies, then maybe they'll inherit the vineyard and keep the extra produce not just for one season but forever.

Seriously? That's what they thought would happen? In what world?

It's an outrageous scheme, and I wonder how these stupid tenants ever thought they were going to get away with it. I mean, they're kind of guys who try to evade the police by speeding away — don't they realize that they'll never get away from the endless reinforcements, not to mention the helicopters? It's craziness!

Do these tenants think they'll get away with murder? The way Jesus tells the story, it seems to think they do. Because after telling this parable, Jesus, asks the critical question: "When the owner of the vineyard returns, what will he do to those tenants?"

And then, right on cue, the Pharisees and the chief priests fall for the trap, hook, line, and sinker and respond as if they're the straight men in a comedy routine.

"The owner 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."

That opens up the opportunity for Jesus to explain the punch line of this dark joke.

Ha ha, joke's on you, religious authorities.

Because once they get the joke, they want to get Jesus. Literally. And they begin to look for ways to kill him.

It looks like Matthew is trying to get us to realize who the bad guys are in his gospel, as if we hadn't figured it out yet. He wants to make sure that we know the Pharisees have it out for Jesus, so he can get on with telling the rest of his story of Jesus. And it wouldn't be a bad thing if he could influence some of those undecided to see the Pharisees for who they are and convert to following Jesus!

The trouble is, one of the outcomes of Matthew's allegations about the Pharisees is that after a couple of centuries of bolstering up the faithful, this story started to be used to fan the flames of anti-Semitism. A friend of mine recently said, "I think that Matthew's point in this week's gospel was, 'you killed Jesus, so you are going to get yours, you nasty so and sos.'"

So, then, how are we *supposed* to read this story? After all, this is Holy Scripture we're talking about, *and at the same time* we realize that this story, in particular, has indeed been used against the Jewish people for centuries.

Well, whatever is going on with Matthew, I still think he can't quite help but address the good news of Jesus. He just can't help it. Take this parable, for instance. It's kind of crazy, when you think about it. Why on earth do these stewards think that they're going to inherit the vineyard?

It's not as if the landlord has disappeared. He's sent servants, and more servants, and then his son. Who's to say he doesn't have another son, or more servants, or an army, or a helicopter, or at least a gang of thugs at his disposal to take care of these tenants. They're crazy, just like all the other crooks who create pyramid schemes, thinking they can get something for nothing.

But think about it. The tenants aren't the only crazy ones in this story...

Who **else** is crazy?

Ding...Ding...Ding. We have a winner.

First the landowner sends servants, and they're beaten, stoned, and killed.

He doesn't call the police, or an army, —he just sends more servants — and *the same thing happens again*.

So where does the guy get the bright idea to send his son, his heir, all alone, to deal with these bloodthirsty criminals? *He's* crazy, too. Who would do such a thing?

No one...except maybe a crazy landlord so desperate to be in relationship with these tenants that he will do anything, or risk everything, to reach out to them. This landowner acts more like a desperate parent than he does a prudent businessman. A parent so willing to do or say or try anything to connect with a beloved yet wayward child, that he'll give up everything. It's crazy, the kind of crazy that comes from unconditional love.

"What will the landlord do when he comes?" Jesus asks, and the only thing these leaders can imagine is enacting more violence:

"He will put those wretches to a miserable death."

But notice — it's not Jesus talking right now. The Pharisees are condemning themselves. That's part of Matthew's narrative strategy, I suspect, to have Jesus' opponents condemn themselves. But of course, we know the end of the story and we know that the way they answer is exactly what they, themselves will do...by the end of the week.

But I think we should ask a different question: not what *will* that landlord do, but what *did* that landlord do?

And to that question we have Jesus' own answer: the landowner sent God's son, Jesus, to deal with all of us who have hoarded God's blessings for ourselves and not given back to God what belongs to God.

And when we killed Jesus, God raised him from the dead, and sent him back to us, yet one more time, still bearing the message of God's desperate, crazy love for us.

Oh, I know, Jesus goes on, at least according to Matthew, to finish this parable and accuse and condemn the Pharisees himself. But at this point, I think Matthew can't help himself from proclaiming a God that is even more merciful than we can imagine. Jesus slips free of Matthew's grasp for a moment, not simply to stand in judgment of the religious authorities and all the rest of us who have used this story to validate our own causes - but even more to introduce us to the desperate, crazy love of God, love offered not once, not twice, but a million times more to all who will receive it.

So maybe Matthew's not a troublemaker. But thank God that Jesus —the Jesus Matthew writes about — is greater than our fear and insecurity. Jesus manages again and again to twist free from our restraints in order that we might taste the mercy of God. In order that we might know, again and again, that our God, so desperate to be in relationship with us, will keep on loving us forever.

Amen