

Isaiah 5:1-7

Matthew 21:33-46

October 4, 2020

World Communion Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE FRUIT OF GOD'S VINEYARD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My brother, David, worked for Martin Wine Cellar and Wines Unlimited in New Orleans for his entire forty-four year career. When he was working, he traveled extensively to Europe, South America, and the U.S. West Coast to visit wineries and get to know the vineyard owners. He became good friends with many of them, especially in the Napa Valley in California.

David and I talked Wednesday night and he told me about talking with vineyard owners in the Napa Valley who have lost everything in the huge Glass Fire that is devastating that area of California. David told me about historic inns in which he had stayed being reduced to rubble and ashes. He mentioned how many vineyards had been destroyed and the tens of thousands of people who have been evacuated. I could hear the concern and wistfulness in his voice as he talked about the difficulties his business acquaintances and friends are going through.

According to the Los Angeles Times, as of Tuesday evening, the Glass Fire had burned 46,600 acres. The fire had quadrupled in size in thirty-six hours and was only 2% contained. Certainly the vineyard owners in the Napa Valley must have done everything they could possibly do to protect their properties, buildings, and vineyards. But, in the face of such massive fires, putting a hedge or wall around a vineyard and building a watchtower in its midst would provide little protection.

We heard two very similar stories this morning, one from the prophet Isaiah and one from the gospel of Matthew, both having to do with the fruit of the vineyard. In Isaiah's story, the vineyard owner did everything in his power to make sure his vineyard would bear good grapes. In Matthew's story, the vineyard owner also took every precaution, and his vineyard produced fruit in season. However, in both stories, something goes terribly wrong. Listen to the vineyard owner's lament in Isaiah's story: "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 wild grapes?" (Isaiah 5:4) Listen to the strange logic of the tenant farmers in Matthew's story: "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." Two very different circumstances — maybe not on the scale of the Glass Fire in California's Napa Valley — but with devastating and disappointing consequences for the vineyard owners, just the same.

The vineyard as a metaphor for God's people is common in the Old Testament, both positive and negative: "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations

and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.” (Psalm 80:8-9) “Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard, transplanted by the water, fruitful and full of branches from abundant water . . . But it was plucked up in a fury, cast down to the ground: the east wind dried it up; its fruit was stripped off, its strong stem was withered; the fire consumed it.” (Ezekiel 19:10, 12)

The imagery of the vineyard, vine, and fruit carries through to the New Testament. Jesus told his disciples, “I am the true vine, and 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. . . I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:1-2, 5)

In the Old Testament story, the problem with the vineyard is the grapes themselves, which are bitter and wild rather than sweet and useful. In the New Testament story, the problem is the tenant farmers, who refuse to give the fruits of the vineyard to the landowner when the time is right. Both stories contain judgment. In Isaiah’s story, God’s people (the wild grapes) are judged because of their social injustice and unrighteousness. In Matthew’s story, the tenant farmers (the religious leaders such as the chief priests and the Pharisees) are judged because they do not properly care for God’s vineyard (God’s people) and do not give back to God what is rightfully God’s.

Today’s gospel story is very similar to last week’s parable about the man who had two sons. He told one son to go and work in the vineyard. That son said, “I will not,” but then he went and worked. The second son said, “I go, sir” but then he didn’t go into the vineyard. Jesus compared the first son’s eventual obedience to the tax collectors and prostitutes who heard and believed John in the way of righteousness and were going into the kingdom of God ahead of the religious leaders.

In today’s gospel story, the vineyard is leased to other tenants who will give the landowner the produce at the harvest time. Jesus says, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruit of the kingdom.” (Matthew 21:43)

During the summer and throughout the fall, I am preaching through the gospel of Matthew, following the lectionary. A lectionary is a list or portions of the Bible appointed to be read at a worship service or used for personal devotions. Typically on a Sunday when we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, I preach from a scripture text such as the feeding of the 5000 or Jesus at the table with his disciples or manna from heaven. When I planned my preaching from the lectionary, I wondered what relevance this parable about the wicked tenants could possibly have for us on World Communion Sunday. Then it became clearer . . .

The margin note next to the Benediction in today’s bulletin is from Maltbie Babcock, who wrote the hymn “This Is My Father’s World.” He said, “If we show the Lord’s death at Communion, we must show the Lord’s life in the world. If it is the Eucharist on Sunday, it must prove on Monday that it was also a Sacrament.” In other

words, coming to the Lord's table on Communion Sunday is about producing the fruits of the kingdom. The margin note next to the scripture lessons today is taken from Jesus' Sermon on the Plain in Luke's gospel: "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its fruit." It's worth hearing the rest of what Jesus says about producing the fruits of the kingdom: "Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks." (Luke 6:43-45)

The judgment in the two stories we heard today is reserved for those who don't yield the good fruit in season, either the wild grapes in Isaiah or the wicked tenants in Matthew. That is sobering news, and is a call for repentance on our part as people who are called to labor in God's vineyard. The gospel today is proclaimed in Jesus' words about "a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."

Even more than that, the gospel is proclaimed and acted out when we eat the bread and drink the cup of the sacrament. When we come to the table of grace, it is more than a comforting and familiar ritual. When we come to the table of grace, we are strengthened in our faith and our resolve to produce the fruits of the kingdom and to walk in the way of righteousness. Especially on this World Communion Sunday, when believers around the world come to the table in solidarity with our Lord and each other, we remember God's promise of grace and God's claim upon our lives to bear the fruits of the kingdom.

To that end, we pray to God this morning as we come to the table:
"We ask your Holy Spirit to come to the table spread around the world today: Bless each person and bless our partaking that we may grow into your body, united in your love, to bring your reconciling peace to the whole world. By this broken bread may we each be restored for the work yet to come. By this shared cup may we each be claimed for the proclamation of your Kingdom."

Let us pray: Holy God, open our hearts and our spirits to receive your holy Word that we may again walk in the path of true discipleship and bear the fruit of your righteousness. Amen.