

Proper 22A

Matthew 21:33-46

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The parable today about tenets who have leased a vineyard from the landowner isn't the first time Jesus uses a vineyard to get a point across. In the agricultural society in which Jesus lived, the imagery of the vineyard would have been easily understood by his listeners. But for us in our urban/suburban society our understanding of vineyards is limited unless you are a wine connoisseur or an avid gardener. For example, do you know how many different varieties of grapes that there are in the world?

10,000! [according to several different sources]. That is a lot of vineyards, whether they are big or small. Given that there are ten thousand different grape varieties, how many different types of wine do you suppose there are?

It is estimated that there are about two hundred different types of wine in the world. Lots of vineyards, though fewer wines, as one wine type may combine several different varieties of grapes.

The process from vine to wine is a long and arduous one. You must understand the uniqueness of the area in which you plant your vineyard as many environmental factors will affect the quality of your grapes. There is the work of pruning, watering, harvesting, and pressing your grapes. Then knowing how to ferment the juice to create a wonderful wine is a true science in and of itself. Vineyards are hard work requiring an investment of your money, time, and a willingness to learn and share with others your knowledge and expertise.

Taking a closer look at the vineyard in today's parable, you will notice that the landowner put in a lot of work to create the vineyard. He cleared the land, prepared it for planting, determined which type of grape would thrive on his land, and planted the vines. Then to help ensure its safety he put a fence around it and even a watchtower to see danger coming from afar. To top it all off, he had dug a wine press so that the grape harvest could be turned into wine. The vineyard was primed and ready to go. Those who leased the vineyard merely had to care for what was already created to ensure a good harvest. The tenets were stewards of the land on which they lived and worked. This was not a rent-to-own situation.

Yet somewhere in the tenets' minds they went from stewards to owners. Not an uncommon human problem. We tend to think that all things we touch as "mine". You have only to watch your social media feed for story after story of entitlement, many of which leave you shaking your head at the absurdity of it all.

But this wasn't a favorite Wal-Mart parking space they were calling "mine". It was the product of all their backbreaking, daily work. They had labored in the vineyard from sunup to sundown to ensure a good harvest while the distant landowner wiled away his hours detached from the hard realities of making ends meet and putting food on the table. On some level, we sympathize with the tenants. We want the little guy to win out.

It is important to remember that the landowner and the tenants had a covenant around which their relationship was centered. The landowner isn't the one who broke the covenant. It was the tenants who broke the relationship and killed the messengers sent in good faith. Notice though that the landowner took no legal action against his tenants, never called the authorities. Even after they killed his son, the landowner let it go. Look closely at the parable, it is the chief priests and Pharisees who condemn the tenants when Jesus asks them, "...when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They say the landowner will call for the tenants death and give the lease to someone else. Jesus neither confirms nor denies their answer.

What we see the landowner doing is extending grace upon grace, mercy upon mercy, never giving up on his tenants to do the right thing. Always giving them the option to repent, to turn things around so that they can live into fullness of life. We learn a lot about God in this parable. He loves us so much that we can screw up time and again, and we will be forgiven. The way of God is not the way of man. This parable is summed up in part of our Eucharistic prayer C (Book of Common Prayer 1979, pg 370)-

Again and again, you called us to return. Through prophets
and sages you revealed your righteous Law. And in the
fullness of time you sent your only Son, born of a woman, to
fulfill your Law, to open for us the way of freedom and peace.

*By his blood, he reconciled us.
By his wounds, we are healed.*

Just as the tenants were stewards of their landowner's vineyard, we are stewards of all God's creation- from the distant edges of the universe to our own little patch of the world here in Norman, Oklahoma. Everything belongs to God. We are merely here for a short time to help care for it all.

Just think of how many churches there are in the world- way more than ten thousand. Big or small, they are like vineyards. St. Michael's is our vineyard. The cornerstone of our church and the way we live every day, the foundation upon which it is all built, was laid by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the only son of God. He watches over us and protects us. Through Christ we are reconciled with God, the creator of all that is, was, and will be.

God planted us here for a reason. That reason was described at our recent Diocesan Convention as our holy calling. Our holy calling is unique to us and changes with time as the needs of our neighbors change. What doesn't change is that we are an inclusive place where God's people can grow into a deeper relationship with God and one another. It is a place where we don't need to have all the answers. We are free to have wonder and curiosity, to ask questions. The wonder and

curiosity, even the questions, builds connections, branches out, and in good time will bear fruit that continues to build God's Kingdom one soul at a time.

God has given us each other. We aren't alone in this endeavor. Big or small, we all have a part to play in building God's Kingdom. Our different abilities, experiences, and insights brought together make us stronger than we would be alone. Let us give thanks to God for one another.

Just like any vineyard, St. Michael's requires hard work and investment to grow. Our harvest is a love that passes all understanding. A love that fills and sustains us in our daily life. It is a love so sweet and rich that, like a good wine, we can't wait to share with someone else so that they too come to share in the heavenly kingdom. Search your heart- how is God calling you to help St. Michael's cultivate a bountiful harvest?

Amen