

19th Sunday after Pentecost (L27A), October 8, 2023
Matthew 21:33-46

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I wonder if you've been feeling like me lately. I've been feeling kind of unsettled. A little on edge. A little uncertain, and maybe a little worried. It's a general feeling, and it's never overwhelming, at least so far. But it is nagging feeling that hovers in the background. I'm concerned about the ongoing partisan divide in this country, and the increasingly harsh and uncompromising rhetoric that is more and more replacing mere disagreement about policy. I know that we have always had heated debates from the opposing sides of our two-party system, but this is something different. It has gone beyond disagreements about how to handle the problems that face us as a country and turned into a fundamental distrust of the government and other institutions that form the fabric of our society. Even libraries, of all things, are under attack these days. And churches, too, are increasingly suspect in the eyes of more and more people, especially younger people. And that is, to some extent, understandable, in an age when the Christian faith has been largely coopted and made to speak for a particular political agenda, at least here in the United States. That at least is the perception that has dominated our media. But it is borne out by studies that show a strong correlation between a person's professed Christianity and his or her political leaning. And then there is all of this disfunction in congress of late. It would be entertaining if it was only fiction, a snarky television satire, say, but this is real, and it has real implications for our country in the near and far term if we cannot find a way to govern ourselves in a reasonable manner. So that, together with some other things in my personal life, are what is unsettling me these days. Maybe you have your own list of things that are unsettling you.

Unfortunately, our readings today don't help matters much. Maybe you've noticed that our readings have been rather ominous over the past few weeks. As we approach the end of the church year, we are also coming to the end of our reading of the Gospel according to Matthew. Matthew ends the way all four Gospels end, with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. And as we get closer to those events, the readings get more intense, and there does not seem to be much good news to be found in them.

Our first reading from Isaiah is a text we use every year as a response to one of the readings of the Easter Vigil, set to a hauntingly lovely little tune. Actually, what we use at the Vigil is an edited version of this text, with the negative parts taken out. The idea of that editing is to focus us on God's good intentions for us, rather than our poor response, because it is God's good intentions and promise that are the theme of the Easter Vigil.

The vineyard image is evocative. Someone planted a vineyard, and did all of the work necessary to ensure good growth, to protect it from wildlife and thieves, and to prepare for its produce. The hill was fertile, and being a hill, it had good drainage, which is what you need for vineyards. I learned that during our years in the hills of southern Illinois. There was a hedge and a wall, there was hoeing and pruning. But the harvest was a bad one: "wild grapes" instead of good grapes. So, what do you do with a vineyard that won't produce? Well, apparently you tear out its hedge and knock down its wall. I'm not sure why you would go to that effort. I think I'd be inclined to just walk away from it. But it's a fertile hillside, so maybe this is a way of reclaiming it for other purposes. I don't know. I'm not even much of a gardener.

Thankfully, Isaiah provides a clear explanation of where he's going with this image: the vineyard is Israel, God's chosen people. God planted them in the promised land to be a light to the nations, to bear the fruits of justice and righteousness, a sort of demonstration farm of God's love for the world. But instead they pursued their own agenda, served themselves by exploiting others,

just like all the other nations. And that bore bad fruit: bloodshed and the cry of the oppressed. And so, God allowed them to be conquered by the Babylonians and taken into exile. How discouraging a text this is in its unedited state. I prefer that Easter Vigil version with the negative parts cut out.

Jesus clearly has this passage from Isaiah in mind when he tells yet another parable about a vineyard, his third in a row, and his audience would have immediately recognized the reference. It's not a very subtle parable, especially if you know where Matthew's Gospel is heading. And Matthew's audience would have known that too. The first two sets of slaves are meant to be the prophets, who proclaimed God's message to God's people, but were rejected. The son and heir, of course, is Jesus. And the tenants? Well, that's the hard part. More about that in a minute. They are those who use God's blessings not to bear the fruit God wants, fruits that will bless the neighbor. They are interested only in what they can get for themselves. So Jesus asks the question, "what do you think will happen to them?" He's still speaking to the priests and the Pharisees, as he has been for the past couple of weeks. They answer that he will get rid of the unproductive tenants and replace them with others who will give him the fruit he's looking for. So, who are the bad tenants meant to represent? By the end of this episode, the priests and Pharisees realize that it is them that Jesus is referring to. The dynamic is like the prophet Nathan's confrontation of David, if you remember that story, where Nathan gets David to condemn himself by using a story. But I think it's also supposed to work that way on us. It's meant to get us to ask what we have done with God's blessings to us. Have we used them to bear the fruits of justice and righteousness, or have we used them only to benefit ourselves at the expense of others? That's what I meant by saying this was the hard part of the story.

Matthew's Gospel was written to a community of Jewish Christians only a decade or so after the Romans had sacked Jerusalem, destroyed its temple and torn down its walls, yet another national disaster for God's chosen people. The parable of the vineyard had come true all over again. It was an unsettled time to say the least. But there is one glimmer of hope here. In Jesus' retelling of the Isaiah vineyard parable he does not end with God utterly destroying and abandoning the vineyard. He instead lets stand the answer of the priests and Pharisees of keeping the vineyard and replacing the bad tenants with good ones. And with the rubble of Jerusalem still all around them, Matthew's community hears Jesus promise to be the cornerstone for God's new building project.

I don't know where things are going with our country, or with the world. We've got a new war this weekend between Israel and Hamas. The war in Ukraine continues. Congress is a dysfunctional mess, our former president is facing unprecedented legal action for unprecedented activities, and we don't seem to know how to handle that. But go ahead, imagine the worst. What if even more difficult days are ahead of us than the ones we've already come through in the past few years? Could you bear that? Would it make you give up hope?

I'm going to promise you that you *can* bear that, and urge you not to give up hope. It's not my promise, though. I don't have it in my power to keep such a promise. I'm just reminding you of the promise Jesus made to the disciples, which is the promise he makes to his disciples of every time and place, the promise he made to you in holy baptism: you are a beloved child of God, and Jesus has promised to be with you always, always, no matter what is still to come. God will not let our "wild grapes" – our foolishness, our injustice, our selfishness – be the last word. God is determined to get good grapes out of us, or to mix metaphors, to turn us bad tenants into good ones. Take heart in that promise and cling to it. And come and be fed with the fruit of the vine and produce of the field, the very body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ that is shared among us this morning. Eat and drink that precious gift in the confidence that God is working in and through you to produce the fruit of love and righteousness that you are created for. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.