

God's Vineyard
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 80:7-15

⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

⁸ You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.

⁹ You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.

¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches;

¹¹ it sent out its branches to the sea,
and its shoots to the River.

¹² Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

¹³ The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.

¹⁴ Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven, and see;

have regard for this vine,

¹⁵ the stock that your right hand planted.

Matthew 21:33-46

³³ 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.

³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' ⁴¹They said to him, 'He 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.'

⁴² Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes"?'

⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Our reading from Matthew comes on the heels of the reading we had last week from Matthew, set in the same encounter. The chief priests and the elders would not say from where John the Baptist, and by association Jesus, were given their powers – through heavenly means or human – because one answer would show they had been wrong and the other would make the crowds of Jesus’ followers angry. Jesus has just told them that tax collectors and prostitutes, who changed their ways and followed Christ, would get into heaven before the chief priests and elders who refused to change their minds about Jesus being from God. He continues today with another parable about people who continue to deny what is right. Rather than sum up the parable for them, though, he asks them, very specifically the chief priests and elders, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They answer from the human, punitive perspective, saying, “He 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.”

I think this is fascinating! With last week’s parable, Jesus does not tell them that the tax collectors and prostitutes will go in to heaven instead of them but ahead of them. That fits with a God of love – God does not banish them – which is why their answer that the tenants would be put to death is so fascinating. They still don’t get it! Not only do they continue to deny Jesus was sent from God but they don’t understand what he has been trying to teach all along – God loves. God judges, yes, and still God loves. Now, I need to say that I get how their human minds could take that interpretation. What Jesus was teaching, not just on that day but throughout his ministry, was a sorely needed reminder. For generations the religious leaders got further and further away from an understanding of God in loving relationship, quite possibly in the wake of repeated overpowerings and exiles. God became a God whose rules needed to be strictly followed in order to stay in relationship with God. Because they taught it, though, didn’t make it right.

Our psalm echoes Isaiah 5, which opens with Isaiah speaking to God and God responding to Israel. Isaiah says, “Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watch-tower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.”¹ God replies, “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? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown

¹ Isaiah 5:1-3.

with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.”² Sounds familiar, yes?

God does not say God is walking out of the relationship. Doing as God expects, desires pleases God but God doesn't check out if we don't. I've said from here before that we are God's good creation. We were created with love and God would not leave what God loves. The parable, and even more so the psalm, remind us of the care God has put into God's people, who are the vineyard. The psalm says, “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.” This is, of course, a reference to the Exodus story, which we know came about because God had heard God's people cry: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”³

This is also, though, a reference to the great care needed to bring about a vineyard. To bring a vine from one place to another to plant it, the vine must be carefully prepared for the travel and then again for the re-planting. Nowadays, vintners try to keep the vine moist and warm until they plant it. If it dries out, they must take the time to soak it before trying to do anything else with it. To clear ground? Whether you've farmed or only gardened, you know how much work clearing the land is. Not only does that mean pulling weeds which could steal needed nutrients or shade the growing plant or even strangle it, but it also means pulling out rocks which could impede the spread of the roots. When we read that the vine “took deep root,” it implies that the soil must have been cleared deeply. This is no simple task and one a person undertakes if they are determined to see the plant survive and thrive. The same care and hopes are conveyed when we read in the parable that the landowner put a fence around the vineyard – to help it survive – and dug a wine press – in hopes it would thrive.

Our readings refer to Israel. As heirs to the promises of God given to Israel through Christ, we are also that vineyard about which God cares and hopes. And we are each branches of the bigger vine, a vine which is planted in the soil of the Presbytery of Milwaukee in the fields of the Presbyterian Church in the land of the church universal. We are all connected, not the same but connected! If you drink wine, you know that different types of wines come from different regions because some grapes do better in certain places. And some wines are blends of different grapes all grown in the same place. There are even grapes which had been thought to have gone extinct, like the Carmenère grape which was once a staple in Bordeaux, France and more than a century later was found growing in Chile. (I could really

² Isaiah 5:4-6.

³ Exodus 3:7-8.

drive this metaphor into the ground and talk about the decline of the church in Europe and the current surge of the church in Latin America but I'll refrain.) My point is God created you with love, tenderly planted you, and whether you've produced abundant fruit your whole life or had some seasons of decline, you are God's and this is the good news of the gospel. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: God, we present our fruits to you for harvest and pray that you bless them that they might serve many. Amen.