

### **Mt 21:33-46 – “Producing Fruits”**

Did you find today’s reading from Matthew’s gospel to be uncomfortably harsh? If you did, I assure you that you are not alone. But the readings for today are the readings suggested in the Revised Common Lectionary and so will be used in worship and as sermon material in countless churches around the world today, as Christians all over the globe celebrate World Communion Sunday. We also are using these suggested readings to listen for what God might have to say to us. If the text does cause us a little discomfort it is a reminder that the Good News of Christ is often meant to challenge us, to cause us to pause, to reflect, to respond.

On the surface this seems a normal enough parable, a story using items drawn from real life to illustrate a point. We have a landlord who invests his capital setting up a vineyard, a rather nice vineyard by the sound of it. On a hillside, as vineyards tend to be, nicely fenced and complete with a winepress. The only thing missing in the description is the tour bus in the parking lot on the top of the hill overlooking the lake! With such a beautiful vineyard, the landlord has no trouble renting it out, and even the rental terms seem fair, as he is looking for a share of the harvest instead of cash up front.

For a while, all goes well in this tiny corner of the promised land. The sun shines down, the rain fattens the grapes, and pretty soon there is wine to go along with the milk and honey. And of course that’s when the trouble starts – when it comes time to pay the rent. The landlord sends some slaves to collect the rent, but they get trashed. Talk about tough tenants! The same fate descended upon a second set of rent collectors. (I think the landlord should have sent some of the landladies I’ve had over the years!) But with a surprising patience that we’ll look at in a bit, the landlord next sends his son, thinking that this way he will get not only the rent but also a bit of respect. Alas, it is not to be, for these are truly tough tenants, and kill the son so that they can grab the vineyard now that there is nobody to inherit it.

Jesus, having set up his audience for the question, asks how the landlord would react to this travesty, and naturally enough the chief priests and the Pharisees answer with enthusiasm that those tough tenants will finally reap not only a crop of grapes but the grapes of wrath. Jesus agrees with them that wrath indeed would come, but in the form of ironic justice, raising images of being broken and crushed by “the stone the builders rejected [that] has become the corner stone.”

When we hear that familiar phrase today we hold in our faith that he was referring to himself. But the chief priests and Pharisees couldn’t catch on so easily. Although we understand what Jesus meant, they couldn’t possibly hear it with the same meaning that we do. Where we retell the full story of his crucifixion and death and rising again, all they had was a face-to-face confrontation with a bizarre religious zealot talking about a vineyard and tough tenants and slaves and a son getting killed and a landlord taking revenge and capping it off with a curious quote from scripture. The chief priests and the Pharisees surely suspected Jesus was targeting them with this story, but exactly how was not clear to them and moreover they were afraid of the crowds’ reaction if they were to take action against this popular prophet.

So, is that the end of this story? Can we leave it here, smugly comfortable that we know who had the kingdom taken away from them, and even more smugly self-assured that it is us who are the new tenants? Many have done just that, and many still do, using this text as the foundation for an anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish, hyper-Christian “nyah-nyah, you lose/we win” taunting. As an aside, have you ever noticed that the branches of the Christian faith that most loudly proclaim the ascendancy of Christianity over Judaism are also the very ones who tend to preach from the Old Testament and demand an obedience to rules and ethics? In any event, a

focus upon the “taking away” misses a key point of the story which is the obligation of the new tenants.

That obligation? Jesus proclaims “the kingdom of God ... will be given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.” When we change our focus from the negative “taken away” and turn to the more positive promise “be given” we begin to hear the kind of response that God is seeking from those who would claim to be faithful.

So what exactly did Jesus mean when he identified those who would receive the kingdom of God as those who would be “producing fruits”? To help answer that question we can look at the role of fruits as an image or symbol in scripture. Throughout the Old Testament the concept of “first fruits” is used as something very positive, as being the “best of the best” both offered to God in thanksgiving and also promised to the faithful especially upon their redemption from troubles such as exile.

“First fruits” are used in the New Testament in a similar way, with Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians (15:20) referring to the risen Christ as “the first fruits of those who have died” and with many other references to the faithful as the first fruits. Even more directly relevant is the call in Luke’s gospel (3:8) to “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” and also those in Matthew’s “you will know them by their fruits” (7:16 and 7:20).

But perhaps the clearest identification of the fruits to which Jesus was referring is in the familiar list in Galatians 5:22-23 ... “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Ah, now what Jesus was saying starts to come clearer, doesn’t it? As does what God is looking for from those who would call themselves faithful. Instead of the kind of harsh, legalistic, unforgiving demands of the chief priests and Pharisees – either those of two thousand years ago or those of today – God is calling for those responding to his forgiveness to offer their own to others; for those who have experienced his generosity to be in turn generous to others; for those who have been comforted by his gentle touch to console others in a like manner; to those who have acknowledged his immeasurable love in the gift of his Son, Jesus, to live a life patterned and defined by love. It is to those who understand that they live by the Spirit and let themselves be guided by the Spirit and produce these fruits of the Spirit that the kingdom of God is promised.

It helps to note also that these fruits are all activities of involvement. They are not the results of theorizing or theological posturing. They are not the products of official decrees and doctrines. These fruits are produced through actions. Actions of love and generosity, manifested through enacting Jesus’ calls to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, comfort the grieving, honour all people. Actions of kindness and gentleness and self-control, manifested through tolerance and forgiveness, offering others yet another chance at hope and redemption. Actions of peace and patience, holding back recriminations in the remembering of all the times we have experienced God’s grace and forgiveness. Producing fruit is work – a labour of love – and peace, and so forth – so to speak. Producing fruit is a way of living out life that brings glory to God, and the kingdom to the faithful.

So, while the message from this parable seems uncomfortable at first, with deeper insight we recognize it is both a challenge and a promise – a challenge to us to be constantly responding in faith to the situations that swirl around us, to be continually nurturing God’s vineyard – and a promise that in doing so we are inheriting the kingdom of God. Come, let us gather at his table, sample the fruits of the harvest, let us taste and see that the Lord is good.