

**27th Sunday in Ordinary Time/October 8, 2017**

**Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46;**

**Rev. Joel M. Krueger**

***"Tenants of the Vineyard"***

Once again we have in our scripture passages, the image of the vineyard. The vineyard is a very fertile image in both the Old and New Testaments. We find mention of vineyards in Proverbs, in the Psalms, in the prophets, in all the gospels, and there are somewhere around 80 references to verses that include vineyards throughout the Bible.

In the Hebrew texts, vineyards were seen as a sign of divine favor and the absence of them as a sign of God's judgment. Isaiah uses the image of the vineyard to refer to Israel, God's planting. And Jesus uses the vineyard to symbolize the Kingdom of God.

In today's texts, the image of the vineyard is very powerful. In Isaiah it is used to express God's frustration, anger and judgment. *"God expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes."* In Matthew, Jesus uses the vineyard image, and quite possibly a reference to these same words from Isaiah, to speak about that place, where God gives the opportunity for us to live out, to create and establish the realm of God's presence.

What I find very curious is the use of the name *"tenants"* for those who work in the vineyard. Remember, a couple weeks ago, Jesus' parable was about the *"laborers"* in the vineyard. This time it is about *"tenants."* That is, those who have been given the responsibility to care for and work in the vineyard and to reap its harvest and then give it all back to the landowner. *They profit if the landowner profits.* So it is to their benefit to grow as good and bountiful a crop as they can. This is the landowner's expectation.

Tenants, understand that the land that they are on, is not theirs. They are only borrowing it, using it, and that they have a responsibility to care for and nurture it. However, in the parable, these tenants seem to think they own the land. They have no intent of giving its produce over to somebody else. They have no respect for those the landowner sends, not even his son, and thus, the implication is, that they have no respect for the landowner himself.

The issue Jesus was addressing was that those who had been given the responsibility for the vineyard, the religious leaders, Pharisees and chief priests, were not caring for the people as God desired. They seemed more concerned about their own status, their own positions of power and influence, their own wealth and prosperity. Like the tenants in the parable, they wanted the vineyard for themselves.

And even though they thought their lives were committed to God, to their nation, Jesus saw their abuse of power, their oppression of the poor and the weak, their misuse of the laws to acquire properties and wealth for themselves, and their disregard for the voices of prophets past and those present who called for change and renewal, as a clear disregard for God as the owner of the vineyard in which they dwelled.

For Jesus, the vineyard of God is the kingdom of God, and is meant to be a place where people work together, where they cooperate, where they care for and nurture the ground upon which they live and all who live upon it. It is a place where the tenants understand that they are

not the landowner, but that they work for a landowner who is generous and gracious and thankful and merciful, but who does require justice! Who requires a justice born of love and compassion.

Isaiah spoke about God's desire for God's people. It's a beautiful passage. It begins with a song. The prophet sings *"Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard."* You can hear the deep felt relationship between the prophet and God, his beloved. And we hear of the hard work and dedication this one put into creating a vineyard. He *"dug it and cleared it of stones . . . planted choice vines . . . built a watchtower . . . hewed out a wine vat."* That's a lot of hard work! The beloved put his whole self into that vineyard.

But the prophet tells us, that instead of wonderful, delicious, sweet wine producing grapes, the vineyard yielded *wild* grapes. *Sour* grapes! Not at all what God intended.

This is the story, not simply of Israel. It is the story of humanity. Though God desires for us to live in harmony and love with one another and with the planet, we seem to be prone to live in evil ways as much as loving ways.

What kind of tenants have we been? Look at our nation. The most rich and prosperous nation on the earth, perhaps in all of history, and still we have 43 million people living below the poverty line, a rate of 13.5% (2015 census data). A 2013 report by the United Nations Children's Fund, on the well-being of children in 35 developed nations, shows the U.S. ranking 34th, between Bulgaria and Romania. In the U.S., more than 20 people experience physical abuse by an intimate partner every minute, equaling over 10 million a year (ncadv.org).

We continue to struggle with the issues of race and racism in our country. We have a history of unequal treatment for people of color. Different rules or standards existed in areas of bank loans and real estate, and Jim Crow laws allowed people of white skin greater privilege than others. There is still racial profiling by some in law enforcement, and most recently we have seen the hatred and prejudice of white supremacist groups that seem more emboldened by the current trends in society.

And during this month when we are shining purple lights in our belfry to raise awareness of domestic violence, we should know that *"Despite having one of the lowest violent crime rates in the country, domestic abuse accounts for a large proportion of violence in our state. The rates of domestic violence assault and domestic homicide are higher in Maine communities than in the rest of the country. Over the past decade, domestic violence homicides have accounted for nearly half of all murders in our state, compared with about 16 percent nationally."* (Jim Davitt, Special to the Bangor Daily News, October 22, 2016)

The world's unrelenting hunger for fossil fuels has led to the raping of the natural environment. Strip mining that tears the tops off of mountains; oil drilling that risks spills that have coated the ocean floors with muck that never disappears; deforestation of the world's "lungs" and the release of greenhouse gases that science tells us has led to climate change; our disregard for the natural environment, is clearly a disregard for God.

Certainly, we are not the vineyard that God desires. We have many issues that need to be addressed. And when voices speak out about the injustices and wrongs that are being done, quite

often they are disparaged, ignored, or persecuted. Like the landowner's slaves in the parable, they are attacked, treated like outsiders, their words or actions of caution and protest are labeled as misguided, bad for the economy or even unpatriotic.

And yet, amidst all of this, we still may find glimpses of the kingdom, signs of the vineyard that God desires. Yesterday, Kate and I were blessed to be part of the wedding of Corinne Grant and Will Kelly. Here we saw the things that make for the vineyard of God. Love between 2 individuals expressed in words of commitment and dedication. Support from a community of family and friends. People enjoying themselves and rejoicing in the happiness of that special day. Infants in arms. Kids running around the dance floor. Food in abundance. People dancing and smiling, music playing, hugs and handshakes and kisses shared between family and friends alike. Here, it seemed was the presence of God in all its fullness!

But we also saw this past week a different vision of the kingdom. In a setting, where the words of Isaiah seemed to come to life: *"For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry."*

In Las Vegas last Sunday night, a man shot into a crowd of concert goers, killing 58 and wounding nearly 500 others. A tragic scene and exceedingly difficult to watch, as many of us did all week on the national news reports. But while the carnage showed the evil side of our nature, there was shown an even more powerful display of what God's vineyard is supposed to look like. Here we saw men and women standing up in the line of fire, to direct others to safe places. Here we saw complete strangers carrying the wounded into pick-up trucks and to hospitals. Here were doctors and nurses and hospital staff working hour after hour after hour, battling through exhaustion, horror and grief to save the lives of the wounded. Here were first responders, running head long into danger, seeking to save and protect any they could. Here we witnessed those who laid on the bullet strewn ground next to those who were dying, so that they would not be alone. For those who asked the question, *Where was God?*, we can answer, *God was right there, in all of these.*

We are the tenants in the vineyard. This world we inhabit is not ours. It is God's. And it is our responsibility to make this vineyard a place of God's love, compassion and generosity, a place of God's presence. A place where the *good* side of our nature shines forth and we work side by side to ensure a safer and more peaceable world. A place where we hearken to the voices of protest and take seriously the calls for change in our society, as we engage and dialogue with one another. A place where God's justice and mercy and kindness are revealed. For this is the *fruit* God desires us to harvest. And so, may we once again become the *"pleasant planting"* of our God. Amen.