

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost - A Proper 22 (2026)

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

“Therefore, 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....” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus uses parables to get his listeners to rethink old stories or ways of doing things. He uses this literary form to shake up his listeners' expectations of how things 'work.' Jesus used ordinary circumstances and events from everyday life that his listeners understood to break open the mystery of God and show how God's kingdom is designed to function. For those folks who were interested or curious, parables offered Jesus the opportunity to communicate the coming kingdom. For those who refused to listen, largely because they thought they had everything already 'figured out,' parables were a mystery and created consternation between them and Jesus.

Jesus had certainly caused some commotion in Jerusalem. He had triumphantly entered the city to the shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David," which caused a stir and many in the city to inquire, 'Who is he?' The next day he entered the temple grounds and found the greedy and self-serving attitude and business-like approach to the selling of sacrificial animals abhorrent, violating the spiritual aspects associated with the ritual sacrifices offered in the temple. His turning of the money changer's tables and the healing of the blind and lame who were there drew the ire of the Pharisees and the scribes. The Pharisees challenge Jesus, asking by what authority he does all these things, and he responds with two parables: the one of the Two Sons and the one for today, that of the 'Tenants.'

At least some in the assembled crowd, and certainly the religious leaders, would have remembered the allusion of the parable of the tenants to a section of scripture from the prophet Isaiah. In it, the prophet speaks of YHWH's love concerning his

vineyard 'located on a very fertile hill.' He dug it and cleared it of stone and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the middle and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.' YHWH then beckoned to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, "What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?" YHWH was expecting grapes, but wild grapes rose up out of the vineyard, and in response, YHWH says that "he will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.... For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold, an outcry."

Jesus tells his listeners that God had done all he could to provide the fertile beginnings of the kingdom for his people. He entrusted the people to till, tend, and nurture the vineyard, expecting a good grape harvest. But they failed to produce the expected fruit, given the quality of the vineyard. The people had failed to follow his commandments and had chased after other gods. In response, YHWH destroyed the vineyard. YHWH had provided them with a land of plenty, flowing with milk and honey, and in return he wanted only the fruit of loyalty, worship, and praise. Instead, he received rejection.

By the time Jesus concludes the parable, the religious leaders realize he's talking about them, and boy, are they upset. First, he shows up to the crowd's adulation; then he creates chaos in the temple; and now he calls them out for leading the people astray by abusing the vineyard God gave them. They did not receive the prophets' message with eagerness and acceptance; they rejected the good news of this new and emerging kingdom, and they sought ways to get rid of him. Jesus knew full well the implications of these parables, and in response, and for fear of the crowds, the Pharisees worked all the harder behind the scenes to devise a way to have him removed.

It seems to me that we've got a couple of ways to look at this parable. First is the good news of grace. Jesus is telling the religious elite that, by their own admission, God will take away the vineyard from the current tenants who had abused the prophets and the son in the parable and offer it to other tenants. It wasn't until this point in the story that they started to get the point that Jesus was

talking to and about them. It doesn't seem to me that Jesus is, at least at this point, assigning judgment against the Pharisees and scribes.

Rather, he's telling them their place in the vineyard is still workable if they repent and return to God's true ways, producing the fruit the vineyard was designed to bear. This isn't so much a condemnation of the Pharisees as a warning of what will happen if they don't change. God is a God of second chances, and Jesus, I think, is putting them on notice that if they don't return to God's ways, God will appoint new tenants in their place. God is willing to give them additional time to work the vineyard, but no matter who tends it, appropriate fruit is expected. It can be them, but if not, God will add new tenants. We know the rest of the story of Jesus' time in Jerusalem, which, in part, results in 'new tenants.' 'We' are the next generation of new tenants, and as such, we're the ones expected to till, tend, and nurture the vineyard of God and produce the fruit that God, the landowner, demands.

Secondly, it seems reasonable to wonder what good and appropriate fruit looks like. As we've been talking about *all* summer, life in the kingdom, the vineyard, is manifested through the love of God and neighbor. This attention to others' needs before our own is a telltale sign of an authentic disciple of Christ. If we, the new tenants, are to prosper and manage the vineyard as stewards of an overly generous landowner, then this good vineyard work begins with an intentional desire and actions that show our love for God and neighbor.

This got me thinking more about our little piece of the vineyard here at St. Paul's and the 'tenants' who work and nurture the fruit it produces. Because we're such a small work crew, some of the work is done by a person or a small team. The rest of us carry other aspects of vineyard living. Think of the following fruit that is *being* produced and offered to others on behalf of our generous landowner:

- Offering the church to several arts groups
- Sharing church facilities with Skagit Art Preschool
- Willingly providing transportation to those who need it for medical or other appointments

- Providing meals and physical, emotional, and spiritual support to others in times of stress or loss
 - We employ the power of intercessory prayer as our ‘Prayer Warriors’ offer prayers to those who are suffering, in need, and at moments of joy
 - Consistent participation in weekly choir rehearsals and Sunday worship
 - The production of a daily ‘Music meditation’ for those in need of healing and spiritual support
 - Sharing of God-given resources for the ongoing ministry of this parish
 - Financial support for Friendship House
 - Ongoing tangible support of our neighbors dealing with housing and employment challenges
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- Providing communion to those who cannot attend church due to illness or isolation
 - The genuine hospitality of ‘warm welcome’ to those who visit or are looking for a new faith community
 - And numerous times of unsung service to others through acts of kindness, compassion, and listening

Friends, this is what producing good fruit looks like in the vineyard of the kingdom of God. Keep it up. Keep getting your hands dirty in the rich soil of the kingdom garden. Let us be fully prepared for the landowner's return and have our baskets filled to the brim with the fruit of our life and labor. Let there be no bloodshed, but justice; no outcry, but righteousness, as Isaiah reminds us. It's up to us...we're the new set of tenants.