

October 4, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)

Matthew 21:33-46

"Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."

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 marvelous in our eyes'?"

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

Message: Love Songs

Well, we've made it to our third and final Sunday
in the vineyards of Jesus' parables.

When we picture a vineyard in our minds,
it's usually as a place of beauty and productivity:
rows of lush green vines, bunches of plump grapes,
rolling hillsides, industrious gardeners and careful vintners.
Not so, these vineyards of Jesus' teaching stories.

Oh, the lessons are good and life-giving;
the grumpy labourers of the first story taught us
that God's generosity to us is in the gift of participation
in his kingdom-work.

The two sons and their father of the second
taught us that all our minds
need Jesus' transforming touch,
regardless of who we are
or what we've been.

Like most things worth doing, though,
we had to do some digging to get to the good news;
not unlike the year-round, back-aching work of a real vineyard.
Today's story is the hardest of the lot,
the ugliest, the most violent
and the most confusing of all.

But trusting that hard work will yield us a harvest,
let's enter into the vineyard and the world of Jesus' story together.

What was that landowner thinking?!

He plants a vineyard, protects it with a fence and a watchtower,
builds the infrastructure needed to make it productive and successful.
And then he leased it out to tenant farmers.

When harvest time came, the landowner sends his servants...
...and they're beaten, stoned, and killed.
Then he sends, not the police, mind you, or an army,
just more servants...
...and *the same thing happens again*.

So where does the bright idea come from to send his son,
his heir, alone,
to treat with these bloodthirsty hooligans?
It's absolutely crazy.
Who would do such a thing?

And of course, the inevitable happens.
They capture the landowner's son,
see their opportunity to take hold of the vineyard
once and for all for themselves,
and they drag him away and kill him, too.
An unimaginable loss, a violent act,
against the laws of civilised society,
certainly against God's law.

What will the landowner do,
 when he hears of this awful act,
 and comes to the vineyard to see his tenants?
 What would any of us do?

The people Jesus is speaking to are quick to answer:
 he will put those wretches to a miserable death
 and let out the vineyard to other tenants,
 who will give him the fruits in their seasons.
 Justice, of a sort.
 Certainly the kind a parent
 could be expected to want,
 in their grief
 over the murder of their son.

Although it's clear then and now
 that Jesus words were directed at the hypocritical religious leaders
 he was talking to,
 who had failed in so many ways
 to embrace all the amazing, loving ways
 it's possible for God's people to live...
 ...did you know that, of all the parables and stories
 told and re-told in the first three Gospels,
 through parallel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry,
 only three parables are told in all three Gospels:
 the sower, the mustard seed...and this one.

That must mean, I think, that Jesus' closest friends and disciples
 thought that Jesus' teachings could not be complete without it,
 ugly and violent as it is.
 So what deeper, essential thing
 could Jesus be trying to teach us?

Jesus puts a lot of effort into describing
 how the landowner established his vineyard;
 it's the same vineyard Isaiah,
 so many centuries before, had described the building of:
 fence and watchtower, planting and pressing.

Isaiah had been writing his own kind of teaching story;

what began as a poetic love song about his beloved's vineyard
 became a warning and a promise,
 that if God's people did not change their ways,
 the protections would be stripped away,
 the soil neglected and parched...
 ...God expected justice in his vineyard, but saw bloodshed;
 righteousness,
 but heard only crying.

God's people refused to change their minds or their ways,
 and God kept his promise,
 using foreign Babylon to plough down the vineyard of his people.
 The exile of God's people
 was a turning point,
 one that paved the way toward
 the renewal of God's relationship
 with his people for a time,
 and ultimately laid the foundation
 for Jesus himself.

Jesus invoked the same image in this parable
 to signal that another turning point was coming,
 another sea-change in the world of God's people...
 ...and then he makes it even more obvious
 by identifying himself
 – the landowner's son in the parable,
 the Son of God –
 as the rejected stone
 that was utterly crucial
 to the kingdom of God.

So is that what Jesus was trying to teach us?
 To consider the consequences of rejecting him, rejecting God?
 An abrupt and ugly end to our work in the vineyard,
 like those awful tenants in the parable?

When the owner of the vineyard comes, Jesus asked, what will he do?
 All they could imagine was violence.
 The answer of a miserable death
 for those wretched tenants
 and new, better people brought in

does seem like fair justice
for dead servants and a dead son.

But it's a very human sort of justice.

And this is, I believe, the good news we've been digging for,
well-hidden in this parable
and in the conversation that encloses it;
that rough justice, that condemnation of the tenants,
of the religious leaders,
that was not Jesus speaking.
They condemned themselves.
I wonder if we do that sometimes, too.

In any case, it invites us to consider Jesus' question anew,
since it hasn't been answered for us after all.
What will the landowner do?
We know the answer.

He sent his Son, Jesus, to save us,
we who have hoarded God's generosity and blessing for ourselves
and failed to give God the increase.
And when we killed him,
God raised him from the dead
and sent him back to us again,
bearing the message
of God's fierce and forgiving love.

No matter how harsh or cruel the world seems to be,
no matter how violent or distorted
our human attempts at fairness and generosity and justice are...
...it is still God's world.
And God loves this world and all of us,
wants to have a mutually loving relationship with us so much,
that he will do anything,
risk anything,
to reach out to us.

God so loves creation
and everything and everyone in it
that he sent his Son,

all for the sake of planting
a new vineyard of love and grace
over the whole world.

God responds
by loving the world even harder,
and even more.

That's God's response to each one of us, too.
No matter how many times we reject him,
how many times we turn away from him;
no matter how many times we are hurt by the world,
get angry with him, feel disappointed,
think we've disappointed him...

...no matter how many times
we see condemnation
where there is only mercy...
...God's answer is the same:
he loves us still, and always more.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.