

Matthew 21:33-46

33: Jesus told the chief priests and leaders to listen to this story:
A landowner once planted a vineyard. He built a wall around it and dug a pit to crush the grapes in. He also built a lookout tower. Then he rented out his vineyard and left the country.

34: When it was harvest time, the owner sent some servants to get his share of the grapes.

35: But the renters grabbed those servants. They beat up one, killed one, and stoned one of them to death.

36: He then sent more servants than he did the first time. But the renters treated them in the same way.

37: Finally, the owner sent his own son to the renters, because he thought they would respect him.

38: But when they saw the man's son, they said, "Someday he will own the vineyard. Let's kill him! Then we can have it all for ourselves."

39: So they grabbed him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

40: Jesus asked, "When the owner of that vineyard comes, what do you suppose he will do to those renters?"

41: The chief priests and leaders answered, "He will kill them in some horrible way. Then he will rent out his vineyard to people who will give him his share of grapes at harvest time."

42: Jesus replied, “You surely know that the Scriptures say,

‘The stone the builders
tossed aside
is now the most important
stone of all.
This is something
the Lord has done,
and it is amazing to us.’

43: I tell you God's kingdom will be taken from you and given to people who will do what he demands.

44: Anyone who stumbles over this stone will be crushed, and anyone it falls on will be smashed to pieces.”

45: When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard these stories, they knew Jesus was talking about them.

46: So they looked for a way to arrest Jesus. But they were afraid, because the people thought he was a prophet.

Sermon: Laboring for Table

Jesus tells a story. A vineyard is created with care. There’s a fence to protect it. There’s a deep pit containing a contraption for catching the scrumptious juices of the wine press. A tower stands watch over the horizon. The monies invested, the resources sustained, the tenants in place, the campus finally complete, the landowner or Creator sets off toward home in a distant land.

In time, the whole complex thrives. Good fruit is born. And as is customary, the landowner sends forth his agents to collect his share.

All of this is above-board for First-Century Palestine. Anyone hearing this story would rightly expect the landowner to collect his annual share. Business as usual. But there's a violent turn.

The first envoy of servants arrives to the vineyard to collect their portion of the harvest, only to be grabbed by the tenant farmers, some beaten, some killed, some stoned to death.

Hardly a warm reception.

By all accounts, the landowner would be well within his rights to respond, and to respond forcefully. His wealth and legal standing would enable him to send a large, heavily armed force of men, ready and willing to exact swift vengeance.

The expected response doesn't happen. The landowner sends a second envoy, bigger than the first, but still not reinforced with soldiers. The tenant farmers offer the same unhospitable hospitality. More grabbing, more beating, more killing, and more stoning.

What now?

Surely the landowner will respond by sending his army to set things straight? Right?

Nope. He sends his son, his heir, because he expects the tenant farmers to have good enough sense to respect his authority. Nope.

Still more grabbing. More beating. More killing. More stoning. One new twist to mention. The previous two envoys were attacked within the walls of the vineyard. The heir is dragged out beyond the walls. And to add to the absurdity of the scene, the tenant farmers believe their disposal of the heir will allow them to possess his inheritance.

So...there's a lot happening here. We expect a contract to hold. The landowner creates the vineyard; the laborers tend it; the landowner comes to settle accounts; if accounts cannot be settled, the landowner enforces payment or removal, and with force if necessary.

But none of this happens. The excessive actions of the tenant farmers are met with unusual restraint from the landowner. At least up until now.

It's also important to note that a parable about a vineyard also conjures up imagery of the vineyard metaphor in Isaiah 5. You'll remember a vineyard that is tended with absolute care. God offers Israel all it needs, loves Israel, labors with Israel, and yet the vineyard never bears fruit. The vineyard was supposed to be a source of righteousness and justice, but it only bore wickedness and infidelity. Therefore, God removes the fence, the tower, and the press. But not so in Jesus' story. Unlike Isaiah's vineyard, the vineyard of this morning's story produces fruit. Its workers simply refuse to distribute and share the fruit.

Finally, let's consider the audience. Jesus is addressing a diverse crowd, including the chief priests and Pharisees who have questioned his authority through the entire book of Matthew.

Most of the crowd, day laborers, would identify with the tenant farmers. To this point in the story, they still imagine themselves as those characters. And they are waiting for a prophetic message from Jesus as to how they might need to reacclimate their lifestyles.

On the other hand, the chief priests and Pharisees, men of wealth and power, would relate to the landowner. And they would resonate with the aggrieved party, and his restraint. As they hear this story, they are thinking, “Yes, we, too, are wise, and sound, and just. We, too, are stewards of a just system.”

Jesus sets up the thrust of the parable. “So what’s gonna happen now? What’s the landowner gonna do to those wicked tenants?” Every listener, be they peasant or Pharisee, day laborer or chief priest, agrees: “Those tenants are gonna get it. The landowner will destroy every last one of them, wipe out their entire existence.”

But this isn’t the end. I hope you know by now to expect the unexpected!

“Really,” Jesus says. “Haven’t you ever read the scriptures, like I don’t know, say, Psalm 118 by chance? *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it’s amazing in our eyes.*”

The cornerstone is of course foundational to any building. It was customary for ancient builders to choose which stone was best suited for its purpose. Some were suitable, others were not. The Psalmist reminds us that only God will determine what is suitable, and that God is gonna do what God’s is gonna do, and with whomever God chooses.

Jesus insinuates that the religious establishment, the chief priests and Pharisees among them, had been tasked to be stewards, tenants, and laborers of God's creation or vineyard. But they had failed to help distribute and share the fruit of God's creation. Furthermore, they were rejecting in Jesus, and more specifically in his application of a Torah meant to fulfill God's law, the very foundation or cornerstone of God's intended world. Jesus says the day is coming when leadership of the God movement will be given over to the laborers who produce fruit rather than to those who continue to withhold it.

And it's at this point, the chief priests and Pharisees realize Jesus is telling them that they are the tenant farmers in the story. That it's them who will be evicted. That it's them who will be held accountable. They don't like it. They want to arrest him. But they fear the crowds. So, they bristle in silence, and we keep heading toward Jerusalem.

I want to tell you that this parable is not my first choice to share with you on World Communion Sunday. I'm not sure it would be my hundredth, or even my thousandth choice, but our use of the Revised Common Lectionary invites us into considering the depth of our scriptures, and to find meaning, even in difficult passages.

How does this story inform our idea of God's table, and a global one at that?

I keep coming back to two words: *creation* and *stewardship*. In the act of creation, God has gifted us goodness beyond measure. Is this faith community not its own vineyard, with press and pit to harvest our resources, with walls to keep us warm and safe, with a tower to



view the horizon of the land around us, and to inspire a vision for what we send out into our world? We are tenants, working stewards, of God's creation, Millbrook Baptist Church. We should continually ask ourselves, "Are we returning some of this abundance to our Creator, and are we also sharing some this abundance with neighbors beyond these walls?"

And here's where the parable meets the table.

Every empire, ancient or modern, keeps preaching the same old gospel of scarcity. And tenants and owners keep fighting to see who can hoard the most. Jesus preaches the gospel of God's abundance. And he offers us a corrective. The fruit the tenants refused to share becomes the fruit Christ insists we place on the table. We are invited to a table where bread, and fruit, and life are shared rather than hoarded.

What does our table look like?

There's room for voices to be heard.

There's room to let others sit with their grief, and a casserole, too, if needed.

Backpacks are assembled for buddies in need; relationships are forged in faraway places like Honduras and Zimbabwe, but also in our own backyards; we laugh, and enjoy the luck of the pot, and share the peace of Christ; we speak our hope aloud, pray for it, too, and hold on tight, with each other, for the week ahead.

This is our bread, our grapes, our harvest, our offering.

And yes, I know, the violence of this passage, even if clearly hyperbolic, is disturbing. As with the last few weeks, I'd encourage you to hear it as unfortunate metaphor, not as a descriptor of God's character and nature.

God's patience and anger are not as short as the exasperated tenant farmer, nor is God's authority as removed, calculating, and forceful as the typical landowner. God creates with love; God awaits patiently for creation to achieve its potential; God exists relationally rather than transactionally.

We learn today that God's creation is not something for us to wield, nor hoard, nor twist to our design. God's creation is something to be experienced and shared. We're all working to get there. Somedays we're clumsy, other days we're a little closer to the Kingdom. But no matter where we are in the world, or what season of life we find ourselves in; no matter how we are feeling at this very moment, there's a table that waits to greet us. It's indicative of a loving Creator who does the same.

Let's press some grapes, Millbrook. For we have wine, and bread, and life, and all of God's abundance to share at a table.

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.