

**Sunday, October 8, 2023**  
**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22A)**

Isaiah 5.1-7; Matthew 21.33-46

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/283330867867427>

*(Sermon begins at about 25:30)*

**“Tenants of God’s Vineyard”**

Before we jump into the sermon, I’m just going to put it out there: today’s Gospel is one of those that, when I read it, my initial reaction is, “what am I going to do with this?” One of those Gospels that, in some ways, is difficult to deal with. Not least of which is because, to the rational mind, it makes no sense. I mean, tenants renting a vineyard, thinking they can get away with seizing ownership of the vineyard? Just from a purely legal standpoint, what occurs in the parable is downright illegal. Even by first century standards. Certainly, conspiracy to defraud at the very least, and grand theft if the plot were to succeed. And then, to accomplish this plot, other crimes are committed: assault, battery, and first-degree murder. Of course, the reason Jesus develops such an outlandish and unlikely parable is precisely to grab the attention of his audience. A signal that in amongst the hyperbolic, far-fetched story presented, there is undoubtedly a message worthy of paying attention to. So what is that message? And what could it possibly have to do with twenty-first century Christians?

Today’s Gospel reading is a continuation of last week’s Gospel, in which Jesus is in Jerusalem mere days before his Passion and ultimately, his death by crucifixion. Almost as a final act of defiance, Jesus goes head-to-head with the temple authorities—the chief priests and elders—on the subject of authority. Particularly authority that is divinely conferred. And, as usual, Jesus uses parables to deliver scathing commentaries—and rebukes—against the status quo, against the Jewish leaders who have, over the centuries, become more and more corrupt in the exercise of their authority. More interested in their own power, wealth, and status, than in the wellbeing of the people. As we heard last week, Jesus first crafts the parable of the two sons as a means of pointing out that the temple authorities have not been obedient to God’s commandments. And today, he puts a period on his criticism—or more like an exclamation point—by implying that the temple authorities have not only not been obedient and defied God’s will, they have also acted corruptly.

To level these charges, Jesus masterfully builds his case by invoking images that would have been very well-known to the people, and certainly well-known to the temple authorities. Images from the Hebrew Scriptures. In this case, the well-known and beloved image of Israel being a vineyard and God being the one who cares for the vineyard. One of the quintessential pieces of scripture that develops this image is the Song of the Vineyard, which is recounted in part in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah. The Song of the Vineyard was initially a rather erotic song containing images of love and fertility that was traditionally sung at the wine harvest. Here, the Prophet Isaiah uses the Song of the Vineyard as an image for God’s relationship with Israel and Judah. Isaiah quotes part of the song in the first couple of verses of today’s passage, but then extends the metaphor of the love between a man and a woman. The

man representing God and the woman representing Israel and Judah. And then there are their children, represented by the grapes. And rather than producing good, domesticated grapes, the vineyard produced wild grapes. Implying unruly and disobedient children. All as a way of signaling that the relationship between God and the nations of Israel and Judah has been corrupted thanks to their disobedient rulers. As a result, the owner of the vineyard takes action to eliminate the evil that has grown over time by destroying the vineyard.

The destruction of the vineyard is actually an oracle for the destruction of Israel by the Assyrian Empire in the eighth century BC, and a warning against Judah, which would, as a result, become a vassal to the Assyrians. And then, in another couple of centuries, Judah itself would be decimated in the Babylonian Exile. The Assyrian Conquest resulting in the loss of ten of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the Babylonian Exile resulting in the scattering of the people and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Significant and painful events in the life and history of the people. These would have been the images that would have come to mind when Jesus told his parable about the vineyard and the wicked tenants. Images foretelling the destruction of the nation yet again.

To break down the symbols, the vineyard, as in Isaiah, is the nation of Israel. The owner of the vineyard is, as in Isaiah, God. The tenants are those charged with the care of the vineyard, the nation. In this case, given the Roman occupation, the tenants are not the secular leaders of the people, but the religious leaders—the temple authorities. The slaves that were sent by the owner represent the prophets of old who were disregarded, then abused and even killed, by the authorities because they did not want to hear what the prophets had to say—what God had to say. All this would have been obvious to the temple authorities. And what would have also been obvious—painfully so—was that Jesus was pointing directly at the temple authorities as being the wicked tenants. As the ones who, because of their unfaithfulness and their corrupt actions, were presiding over another impending downfall. Implying even the possibility of another destruction of the temple. Which, by the way, would happen a mere 40 years later.

Unlike the prophecy from Isaiah, Jesus' parable contains a twist. The introduction of the son of the landowner. Obviously meaning himself. And even noting in the parable that the wicked tenants would kill the heir in an attempt to maintain their authority. Foretelling what would happen in just a few days, when they would arrest Jesus, the heir, the son of the landowner, on charges of blasphemy. Effectively claiming that he is not the rightful heir and then having him killed.

And again, unlike the prophecy from Isaiah, the vineyard is not destroyed, but rather is entrusted to new tenants, thanks to the landowner's—to God's--mercy. Here we need to be very cautious. As one commentator notes:

Over the centuries, Christian interpreters have often read this passage as justifying a “supersessionist” relationship between Christianity and Judaism (the abhorrent idea that Christians have superseded and replaced Jews as inheritors of God’s covenant and salvation), sometimes to the point of justifying Christian violence against Jews . . . this is a grotesque distortion of the parable—and indeed, not just a distortion, but also a pathetic example of falling into the very sin the parable warns us against.<sup>1</sup>

If anything, this parable is not about one religion taking precedence over or being superior to another. Jesus was not out to start a new religion. He was more interested in reforming Judaism, returning to right relationship with God. And, extending that relationship to include Gentiles. As such, this parable is really about redefining the parameters of God's relationship with humanity in general. This is indicated by the fact that in the parable, unlike Isaiah's prophecy, God is not interested in destroying the vineyard. He is interested in bringing in those who would seek to be faithful to his wishes. Whoever that may be. Jew or otherwise. Indicated by the fact that, throughout the parable, the landowner—God—is patient and merciful. When the wicked tenants mistreat and even kill the slaves sent to collect payment, the landowner is merciful. Instead of going nuclear on them, he sends other slaves. When that doesn't work, he continues to be merciful, sending his son.

When that doesn't work, the landowner still does not retaliate or seek retribution. He does not respond with vengeance or violence. When asked how the landowner—how God—should respond, it was the temple authorities who said that he should “put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” But our ways are not God's ways. Thankfully. No, God's mercy is evident throughout the parable. Instead of the retribution the temple authorities think is warranted, Jesus quotes a passage from Psalm 118: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” Indicating what is to come. Indicating what is about to unfold in the coming days with his own Passion. Defeating sin. Defeating death. Actions which would wipe the slate clean and bring about salvation for all. The Passion being a version and a vision of the merciful, inclusive, reversal portrayed in the parable of the wicked tenants.

In light of this reversal of all that has gone before, of all that is implied in the parable of the wicked tenants, Jesus redefines what it means to be faithful to God. It is not about following a bunch of archaic religious laws that only serve to make the temple authorities more wealthy at the expense of the least of God's children who can barely make ends meet, let alone pay temple taxes and purchase expensive animals to be sacrificed on the temple altar. Instead, Jesus tells us that God is asking for a different form of sacrifice. “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you”—from those who pervert God's laws—“and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom.”

What exactly is meant by “the fruits of the kingdom” and what it means to produce those fruits would be a whole sermon in itself. Or a series of sermons. You could enumerate so many actions and attributes that would fall within the category of fruits of the kingdom. A recent commentary on today's Gospel aptly entitled “Cultivating the Fruits of the Kingdom” lists these fruits as “faith, justice, mercy, peace, forgiveness, chastity, faithfulness, generosity, love of the poor, love of one's family and friends — even love of one's enemy — kindness, truth, sincerity, courage to speak the truth and witness to the faith, and an evangelical spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Or synthesized down to the even more concise list that is the Greatest Commandment, the fruits of the kingdom, at its essence, is to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The exact opposite of what the wicked tenants did, but exactly what Jesus modeled for us through his life and ministry. That being the case, the message contained in the parable of the wicked tenants—one that applies to all people for all time, is simple. If we follow these

commandments, if we live these commandments, we can be assured of our continued place as tenants in God’s vineyard.

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<sup>1</sup> “Amazing Grace: SALT’s Commentary for Nineteenth Week after Pentecost,” SALT, October 2, 2023.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/9/29/amazing-grace-salts-lectionary-commentary-eighteenth-week-after-pentecost>.

<sup>2</sup> Msgr. Charles Pope, “Cultivating the Fruits of the Kingdom,” National Catholic Register, October 5, 2023,

<https://www.ncregister.com/features/cultivating-the-fruits-of-the-kingdom>.