

THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 8, 2023

ISAIAH 5:1-7 | PSALM 80:7-15 | PHILIPPIANS 3:4b-14 | MATTHEW 21:33-46

There's a certain genre of YouTube video that people forward me about once a quarter. The details are always different, but the setup is usually the same. It's a video of a kid or teenager sitting at a table being shown an object that baby boomers grew up with. Think rotary phones or camera film. I used to find these videos funny, but they became distressing when they started showing kids the stuff I grew up with. Think mp3 players (the Zune!) or—I'd forgotten about this one until recently—the printed book of people's faces, a literal face book, that I was handed on my first day of college.

In any event, the punch line of the videos comes when the kids can't figure out two basic questions. *Where is this from? And what am I supposed to do with it?* The answers they come up with are as creative as they are wrong. Incidentally, *Where is this from?* and *What am I supposed to do with it?* are also the two major questions at the heart of the parable Jesus tells today.

You may have noticed that the setting of our gospel readings changed a couple of weeks ago. We are no longer in the pastoral countryside of Galilee. We're now in the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem. That means that instead of his usual conversation partners the Pharisees, Jesus is now talking to the religious leaders like the chief priests, too.

This religious elite wants to understand who Jesus is and why he's here. So he tells them—what else?—a parable. This is a parable about a landowner who plants a vineyard, builds a watchtower, puts up a fence, and constructs a wine press. He goes away and leases the land to some tenants. In theory, the tenants will grow grapes, enjoy the fruits of the harvest, and give the landowner some of the harvest in return. Everybody wins.

Is that what happens? No. When someone shows up to collect some grapes, the tenants beat him up. Another messenger they kill. Another messenger they stone. When the landowner sends his son to try to talk to them, they concoct a plan to kill him to get his inheritance, which in addition to being needlessly violent, is also not how inheritances work. The vineyard that was meant to look like something out of *Under the Tuscan Sun* ends up looking like something from *Lord of the Flies*.

It's easy here to identify the problem with the tenants as their violence. But there's something deeper going awry here. The problem is not just the violence. It's also that they've misunderstood the purpose of the vineyard and what their responsibility is. They're acting as if the vineyard exists simply for their own benefit. They are behaving as if they own the place. They've forgotten who it's from and what it's for.

Jesus is likening the tenants to the religious elites within his socio-religious context. These individuals were entrusted with the liturgical flourishing and spiritual welfare of God's people. This is, in and of itself, a good thing. But they have begun to use that vocation largely for their own benefit. It's not a coincidence that this parable comes shortly after Jesus threw the moneychangers out of the temple. The people who are being critiqued here are not Jews in general—when Jesus said that the first into the kingdom would be tax collectors and prostitutes, he was talking about his fellow Jews. What he's criticizing is a pattern of behavior this religious elite is falling into.

And it's a pattern of behavior that we fall into as well. When we forget that everything comes from God and exists for God, things begin to go awry. We stop receiving what God has entrusted to us, and we start extracting what we believe is ours alone. We extract as many resources as we can from the environment. We extract as much value as we can from other's labor. We extract as much as we can out of our relationships with others. And when we've run those resources dry, we throw out whatever's left.

We talk about the gifts of God a lot in church. You'll see that "gift" language show up at least three times in the rest of today's service. But the gifts of God are not given so much as they are entrusted. There's a difference between the two. When we give someone a gift, we say, *It's yours. Do whatever you want. Don't spend*

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it all in one place. Or do spend it all in one place. What do I care? But entrusting someone with a gift means that we have some kind of purpose in mind for it. The gift is meant to be used toward some greater end. If, for example, someone gave you your grandmother's wedding dress, and you cut it up to make dish towels, they would probably be upset. And they might even say, "That's not what I gave it to you for."

The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schemmann put it this way. We "forget that the world, its air or its food cannot by themselves bring life, but only as they are received and accepted for God's sake."¹ We might not be as violent as the tenants on the vineyard, but we can certainly be as forgetful. When we abuse creation for our own comfort, when we use our neighbors as means to our own ends, when we construct our own identities to feel superior to others, it isn't difficult to hear God saying, "That's not what I gave it to you for."

But notice how God deals with this problem. Jesus even asks his audience, "What do you think the landowner is going to do when they show up?" And the answer, we expect, is punish them. And sure enough, they reply, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Is that what God does? No. Here's the twist in the parable. Jesus says, "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 amazing in our eyes?'"

Instead of pulling people and creation even further apart as a way to punish people, God uses our own resistance to draw people closer together. What we push away, what we reject, and what we try to eliminate becomes the center of God's new community. Matthew's Jesus is alluding to his crucifixion, to the ways in which our attempts to push God away becomes the means by which God draws even closer to our hearts.

God's intent, God's goal, God's dream if you like, is not a world in which people are drawn further and further apart from one another, a world in which we all exist only as discrete individuals. But a creation in which everything exists in enriching and fulfilling relationship with each other.

God responds to our turning inward not by punishing us, but by creating a communion that turns us back out and allows us to see each other the right way. A communion in which we recognize where the gifts of creation, our neighbors, and our lives are from. And a communion in which we understand what these gifts are to be used for.

You know this. One of the hymns you chose for today, this is one of Barbara Traficant's picks, gets it exactly right. The first verse goes: "Build a longer table, not a higher wall / feeding those who hunger, making room for all. / Feasting together, stranger turns to friend, / Christ breaks walls to pieces, false divisions end."

To understand where our gifts are from is the beginning of gratitude. And to understand what these gifts are for is the beginning of ministry. When gratitude and ministry meet, the walls we build between each other become the tables where we meet around the presence of the risen Christ.

As it is at table, so it is in life. It's all from God. It's all for God's sake. Thanks be to God.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ Alexander Schemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 6.