

“Tending the Vineyard of Love”

As I noted last week, context is always important when discussing the Bible. Jesus tells this parable during what we call Holy Week. The day before he made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by the cleansing of the Temple. Now he has returned to the Temple and is teaching. Prior to today’s reading he told the Parable of Two Sons, the parable we discussed last week. The upshot of that parable was a condemnation of the priests and elders who did not accept the authority of John’s baptism, and praise for the worst of sinners who sought out John’s baptism of repentance. The Temple priests and elders are appropriately chastened, but Jesus is not done with them and thus follows the parable we just heard.

This parable appears in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) but Matthew’s is slightly and importantly different. While all three versions are violent, in Matthew the most extreme violence is not pronounced by Jesus but by the priests and elders.

It comes when Jesus asks the question, “What then will the owner of the vineyard do?” In Matthew’s version the Temple priests and elders respond, “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.” To me this the parable and the following Biblical citations make more sense when it is the Temple priests and elders who condemn the tenants. With those words in their mouths it is clear their thinking represents the ways of this world not of the Kingdom of Heaven. They focus on retribution and returning violence for violence.

Jesus’ response is to turn their attention to scripture. First he recites a portion of Psalm 118:<sup>1</sup>

“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone  
this was the Lord’s doing,  
and it is amazing in our eyes”<sup>2</sup>

He is pointing out to the Temple priests and elders that they are the ones whom God has given responsibility for tending the vineyard and they have failed. They have failed to heed the prophets of God whom they threw out of the vineyard and even God’s son whom they will kill. Rather than being ones who are to tend the vineyard and have it produce for the Glory of God, they have tended it for their own glory.

The cornerstone, which is the word of God, they have rejected by their self-righteous, holier than thou attitudes and practices. What is more, the word of God which they were to abide by and have abide within them they have used as a stumbling block for the people, but their misuse of God’s commandments will be a stumbling block for them. Once again the priest and elders are condemned. It is not a pretty sight.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the same psalm that the crowds echo during Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, specifically Psalm 118:26

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 118:22-23

The Church over the millennia sadly has not learned the lessons of this parable. The Christian Church—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant and non-denominational—has failed and still fails to tend the vineyard of the Lord faithfully.

We expel or kill prophets. I think of the many people burned at the stake and tortured before, during and after the Reformation. Scientist who were excommunicated for their discoveries that went against the Church's teaching, and more recently civil rights leaders like Emmet Till and Martin Luther King, Jr. who were murdered for claiming equal rights for people of color.

The Church too often ignores the teachings of God's son. I think of how we ignore the predicament of the poor, hungry and homeless. There are solutions to their plight but we lack the courage to do God's will to care for them. Our political leaders who often profess to be Christians are often the least sympathetic and least motivated to address the systemic issues. They seem to worship at the altar of mammon rather than the altar of God.

Christians have frequently treated our fellow human beings as something less than human; less than beloved children of God. In this case, I think of the Crusades, the pogroms in Russia, the Holocaust in Europe, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, subjugation of the Irish, and the indigenous peoples of South Africa, Australia, and North and South America, and the disregard for asylum seekers who are languishing right now at our borders. Nearly every one of these horrors was done with at least the complicity, if not the outright sanction, of so-called Christians and the Church. Yes, other religions and atheists have done the same, but they do not claim to follow the Prince of Peace and the Son of God; Jesus who welcomed and loved every person he met and who commanded us to do likewise.

We have a lot to answer for before we start pointing fingers at the priests and elders of the Temple. We have a lot of work to do. The cornerstone that the builders rejected and Jesus says will crush those who oppose it is over our heads. While we as a parish may be doing well in some areas<sup>3</sup> the word of God is convicting us to do more. We cannot be complacent via our second hand association through the parish. We have to do more. For example, this small basket should be filled every week with food for Seven Loaves food pantry. It only requires each of us to bring one item for it to be overflowing. Yet, many weeks it is nearly empty.

We are the keepers of God's vineyard. Until we accept that responsibility as seriously as we accept the responsibility to our 401k, mortgages, and car payments, we are going to be convicted over and over again by this parable. Individually, we don't have to save the world, but faithfully tending to the garden in which we are planted can lead to a more peaceful world, a more just world, and our own sense of peace which only God can provide.

---

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel supports Seven Loaves, Windy Hill, A Place To Be, Blue Ridge Hospice, and LAWS through grants.