

Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Matthew 21:33-46

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 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 get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when 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 lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” Jesus said to them, “Have you never read 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’? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard this parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Sermon

In the summer of 2001, my newly wed wife and I headed west for our honeymoon. We planned wonderful week in Napa Valley and Sonoma Valley, California where we stayed and traveled among the vineyards. We learned about the process of growing grapes, of harvesting and then making wine. We learned about the different varieties of grapes and wines, the tastes and smells and histories. But most of all, we took in the beauty of the landscape, the rows of vines neatly cared for, stretching on for miles in all directions. The large barns, the barrels, the caves and cellars, the distinctive bottles and glasses. We also encountered the art of storytelling shared by owners and managers, but especially the owner of the bed and breakfast we stayed at. Every afternoon he would welcome his guests into his private wine cellar, pour a more than generous “taste” of one and then another and another selection. And the whole time he would share stories about the vineyards and the wines, describing the taste and body, food that would go wonderfully with it, and the joy of life. It comes as no surprise to me, then, that the Vineyard was a source of stories going even to Old Testament times. In fact, in Hebrew poetry, the Vineyard was a metaphor for a lover.

Thus Isaiah’s prophetic parable begins “Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard”. And then Isaiah goes on to describe the gracious and loving work of the vineyard owner, clearing the property, preparing it for planting, cultivating the vines, building a watchtower and wine vat - doing everything imaginable that would help produce good fruit. But, for some reason, the owner gets wild grapes instead. Wild grapes, or more literally translated, stinky fruit. He goes on to describe the frustration of the the owner, and the outcome of the vineyard. In the end, Isaiah describes the expectations of the owner for the fruit of the vineyard: “he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

And the vision of bloodshed has played across our TV’s and the sounds of rapid gun fire and cries of the people trapped within the crowd have been heard on our radios. And, not for the first time, but once again, and all too often, the vineyard has fallen to pieces.

Jesus takes up the parable of the vineyard many times, and in our text today, we once again have the owner who prepares loving and graciously the property and the vines, then places stewards to watch over the growing and harvest of the fruit. He sends his servants to make a final accounting of the harvest, but the stewards of the vineyard decide to work against the owner, beating and killing the servants. The owner sends his son in the hopes that he will be respected, but the stewards of the vineyard also kill him, and we are left wondering what will happen when the owner returns. And the Chief Priest and Pharisees recognize that Jesus is speaking against them, the religious and political leaders of the people who were called to be stewards of the owner, but instead have become stewards of their own interests.

Today, the church has become the new stewards of God’s vineyard. We have become the caregivers and servants of the Lord. And the fruit we seek to harvest is still the fruit of justice and righteousness. But it can feel overwhelming, in the midst of social and

cultural stresses, it can be hard not to turn inward, to survival modes and exhaustion. In the face of bloodshed and the cries of the oppressed, it can be easy to make ourselves, to make the church less, so as not to create controversy or responsibility. But we are the tenants of God's beloved Vineyard, we are called to watch over the people, to be examples of justice and righteousness and calling our brothers and sisters to join us in this ministry.

So where does it begin? Radical Generosity. That is where God begins and that is where we must begin also. In the face of bloodshed and the cry of the oppressed, we must go beyond a tear and a prayer. We must become investors in justice and righteousness. Every change in the world around us comes through invested people. People find their passions and interests, their time and money and they invest it in a dream of what can be and will be.

One pastor once described the local church as "the best hope for the world." What he was pointing to was that the local church is on the ground, in and a part of the community, and directly touches the lives of those who come in and those that we reach out to. But if White Lick is to live into this hope, it will happen in the same way it has happened in the past, with investors who commit themselves to helping this congregation be good stewards of the hope that God has given us to share. Thanks be to God for the saints of old who have bore the light of Christ in the past. Thanks be to God for the investors of the present and future whose lives will take up that torch again and shed a light of justice and righteousness and hope. Amen