

Sermon on Matthew 21:33-46, Isaiah 5:1-7
17th Sunday after Pentecost, October 4, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends, grace and peace to you from our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

As we gather today to worship God, hear God's Word and celebrate holy communion on this Feast of St. Francis, we remember that one reason we worship is to praise God our Creator, who made all plants and animals, gave us water to drink and air to breathe, the gifts of life. God gave us the fields of grain that feed us, and the vineyards that bear fruit - which is where the bread and wine come from that feed us in this holy eucharist. We know that the bread and wine for this table come from somewhere - fields of wheat in the Midwest, local bakeries that bake our bread, and local vineyards and wineries that provide the wine - all which we call the Body and Blood of Christ in this meal! But it all starts in the grains of wheat and the grapes that grow on a vine, gifts of God to our tables today.

Two of our scripture passages today are about vineyards, in Isaiah's love song and in Matthew's gospel. We would be remiss if we talked about these two familiar passages without remembering the thousands of people in California today who own vineyards or live in regions around them, who have lost their vineyards, their homes and livelihoods, and some even their lives from the wildfires raging through the hills and valleys of California wine country this past week. Not only because such wildfires are common in the late summer due to drought, meaning it's just "their problem", but also because we all have a part in the climate change which is a major cause of the warmer temperatures and lack of rain, which has led to this wide-spread destruction of recent years in the West. We pause to remember them and their losses, and reflect on what we have done and haven't done which has helped lead to these disasters, by failing to care for Creation.

As for the first passage from Isaiah...it's a parable, actually a love song sung about a vineyard that God created, which we readers should know was the people of Israel and Judah. The poem portrays the people to a vineyard, which God had lovingly created with everything needed to produce the fruit to make the finest of wine, yet all that came out of the vineyard were wild, sour grapes. What should God do with such a vineyard, but have it trampled and removed, because it didn't produce the intended fruit. So what is the meaning of this poem? The intended fruit of God's people was justice and righteousness. But instead of justice God's people produced only bloodshed and violence, and a loud cry instead of righteousness and peace. In verse 8 Isaiah condemned the rich, who joined house to house and added field to field, expanding their mansions and their lands at the

expense of others, “*until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land.*” That was the message of Isaiah to his own people.

Today the meaning is the same - God has given us all we need in our world for everyone to live abundant lives in peace, but you can see all around us the violence and bloodshed, with loud cries of protest against injustice. Our fields and cities are burning, and our waters are polluted. We have closed our borders to immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers fleeing danger and persecution in their own land, building border walls and deporting our immigrant neighbors. We have allowed the rich to receive economic benefits while those losing their jobs and health care are ignored. Some of us can work from home, while others have only the option to take risks as “essential workers” in hospitals, care centers, schools and the food industry. Some build larger houses while our neighbors are evicted or go homeless during a pandemic. Our nation declares itself “full”, and closes doors to refugees, admitting the lowest numbers in years, and will not welcome them as many of us were welcomed. What will God do with such a people as us? What can we do in response but repent, turn ourselves around, and walk in a new direction with God, relearning how to care for one another? So we ask God in the Psalm today, “*Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved!*”

Then there is the *Parable of the Wicked Tenants* from Matthew’s gospel, which doesn’t contain much good news at all, it seems. As we read last week, Jesus was teaching in the Temple of Jerusalem when he told this parable to the crowds, overheard by the chief priests and the elders, who wanted to know on whose authority he did these things. It’s the story of another vineyard, leased by tenants from a landlord, who wouldn’t pay their rent when it came due. The servants sent by the landowner to collect the rent they treated with violence, by beating one, killing one and stoning another. When the landowner sent his very own son to collect the payment owed, they even killed him. “What should the owner do to such tenants?” Jesus asked. The priests and elders said that such wicked tenants should be punished and die a miserable death, and the vineyard given to other tenants, who would produce fruit. It wasn’t Jesus who said that! Jesus quoted Psalm 118: “*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes*”! He warned the priests and elders that the Kingdom of God was like that vineyard, and would be taken away from those who wouldn’t produce fruit for the kingdom. That’s when the priests and Pharisees plotted Jesus’ arrest, because they knew he was talking about them.

I must offer a warning here. It is very common in the history of Christianity to see these parables as a condemnation of Israel, and the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ time, for not doing right by God’s people or bearing fruit for God. That could be

how Matthew saw it, after the crucifixion of Jesus, his resurrection from the dead, and the Romans destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Later on, Christians have said that this shows how the Church took over as the rightful “tenants” of God’s vineyard, replacing the vine of Israel with the Church and the Kingdom of God. But such interpretations serve only to place blame on ancient Israel or the Jewish leadership in Jesus’ day for not being faithful to God, for neglecting God’s people and not bearing fruit. The true meaning for us lies in also seeing ourselves in the poem from Isaiah and this parable of Jesus. How have we fallen short of God’s expectation of us, in our care of God’s Creation, of God’s vineyard today, in our own lack of faithfulness and our injustices towards other people in our own world?

If we see the Church as the vineyard in which God has placed us, how have we fared as leaders and as tenders of the mission - the people in our care? God calls us to share God’s love, mercy, and forgiveness with all the people around us, living with righteousness and working for justice. Have we shared the good news of God with everyone, or kept it to ourselves? Have we opened the gates to the vineyard and welcomed others to join us in tending the vines? What kind of fruit have we produced in our lives - has it really been *God’s Work, Our Hands*? And, if we see the whole of Creation as the vineyard, what have we done to care for it?

Today we commemorate Francis, the son of a wealthy merchant in the 12th century who renounced his wealth and inheritance, devoting himself to serve the poor, and lived with lepers. Francis founded an order of friars called “Franciscans” who took vows of poverty and took nothing on their missionary journeys. They preached with their good works, “using words if necessary”. Francis honored all Creation, and often referred to the animals as his brothers and sisters. We do well to imitate Francis in his humility, discard our overdependence on material possessions, care for God’s Creation, and work for peace in the world. Maybe this is how we can learn to be disciples who truly care for God’s vineyard and bear the fruit that truly matters. We honor Saint Francis today by blessing the animals who are pets living in our homes today, recognizing the companionship and love that they give to us. May the love and care we give to animals and our own children build in us the compassion we need to care for God’s creation and treat all human beings with respect and love. So we pray the prayer attributed to Francis:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union;

Where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.