

Tenants in the Kingdom

In the passage from Isaiah, the prophet speaks with beautiful, poetic language, what he describes as a love song. And in this song, God is the vine-grower and Israel is God's vineyard. "Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard. For my beloved had a vineyard, set upon a fertile hill." We can picture God laboring as a loving gardener. God cleared the land and made it ready. "My beloved planted it with choice vines," Isaiah says, "and built a watchtower, and dug out a vat to make wine." The master of the vineyard is described as tender, and generous, and compassionate. The work has all been done, so that a good harvest will come.

But the story turns. Instead of good harvest, the vineyard yields wild grapes. Instead of producing justice, God sees that the people have produced bloodshed. Instead of righteousness, God hears only an anguished cry. The passage reveals God's own yearning and heartbreak over this. What more could I have done that I did not do, the Almighty asks.

Jesus must have been familiar with this passage from Isaiah when we told this parable about the landowner of the vineyard and the tenants. His parable begins in a similar way: There was once a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a fence around it, he dug a winepress, and built a watchtower, and gave it into the care of others.

Once more, we have a story that begins with great promise, and yet it turns out badly. When the master sends his servants to collect the fruit of the vineyard, the tenants seize the servants and beat them. They kill one and stone another. We are not told exactly why they do this. Maybe they resented the landowner having so

much, and they wanted more for themselves. Perhaps they felt that they deserved more after working the entire summer. Regardless of why they do it, their actions are wicked and foolish.

The story continues as the landowner, still caring and patient, sends other servants, sending even more than the first time. But they are treated the same way. They are beaten, stoned, and killed. Finally, the master sends his own son, hoping that they will respect him. But the tenants choose to treat him the same way. They are so blinded in their selfish vision that they believe by killing the son, they will somehow then receive his inheritance. Just like in the passage from Isaiah, the story is tragic. The landowner, or God has so much to offer, and yet the people do not respond. Instead of justice, there is bloodshed, instead of righteousness, there is a violence.

Then Jesus delivers the final message. He tells the chief priests and Pharisees, this story is about you. Of course, they are furious because Jesus is right. And the next thing they do is to find some way to arrest and put Jesus to death. The next few chapters of Matthew show that this is exactly what they did. The sad irony of this story is that even though they recognize themselves in the parable, they immediately go and do what the characters in the parable did. Jesus laid out the truth for them, and rather than change, they simply follow the same old script that will lead to their own destruction.

Both these stories are about stewardship. We sometimes talk of stewardship in terms of giving of our financial resources to the church, and at this time of year, we turn our attention on making an annual pledge; we will do that at All Saints in a few weeks. Making a financial commitment to the church is important. But stewardship is so much more than that. Stewardship is really just another way to describe being a disciple; it is being invited to consider everything God is giving us, and then ask the

question, “What are we called to do in response?” After I have said “yes” to following Jesus and giving myself to God, we then ask of ourselves, “How shall I live my life?”

How do we respond with the gifts that God gives to us? We could look at these stories from scripture and ask, “These people were given so much, what went wrong?” And we could ask of ourselves, “What happens when we misuse and neglect the good gifts we have been given?” Conversely, “What does it look like when we ordinary humans use what we have been given to bring about a harvest? How can we help produce a harvest of justice and life and healing?”

I once saw a human-interest story on the news about a woman named Joan. Joan was not what most of us would describe as rich, but she did live comfortably: she had a lovely house, she drove a nice car. She had a job, and a family. She explained that despite all she had, she didn’t feel happy. And even when she got more stuff, it never felt like it was enough.

One day, a friend of hers was diagnosed with cancer, and became quite ill. Joan decided to make some homemade soup and take it over to her. Her friend was very thankful and remarked that Joan’s soup probably did as much to make her feel better as any medicine she had been taking. This was a small offering, but something began to happen for Joan. She realized she had something to offer. She may not have a lot of extra money, and she didn’t consider herself to be particularly talented, but she could make soup. Really good soup. And something inside told her she ought to pay attention to that and act on it.

In days and weeks that followed, Joan kept making soup. She contacted the cancer support group that her friend belonged to, and she offered to make soup for their gatherings. It wasn’t long before she was making soup for the individuals of the

group and their families. Joan and her very average kitchen began producing large quantities of soup – for people she had never noticed or thought about before. Her circle of giving and compassion grew. Her offering of soup, simple soup, became a place of healing for others, and of transformation for Joan as well. Joan described that she felt as if her eyes and heart were opening up to the world around her. She was giving more than she ever would have guessed she could have given, and she was receiving more than she would have imagined. And, of course, that elusive gift of happiness happened to come along in the process.

We often think of our possessions in terms of ownership: I own a house, a car, a lawnmower, my clothes. Parents may talk about their children taking ownership of their rooms, meaning they need to keep them clean. The church talks about people taking ownership of the various ministries they do. But the larger truth is, and these scripture stories remind us, that most important thing is not about what we own. The pastor doesn't own the ministry of the parish, and neither do you. We don't own the vineyard, this world, where we have been placed. We don't own the earth. And as Paul pointed out in his letter to the Philippians, we don't even own our salvation or righteousness, because it all comes from God. It is all gift. Paul says, if anything I just keep reaching out toward this. I don't possess it; I am just on the way. What matters is that Jesus Christ has made *me* his own. It is all gift.

Instead of ownership, it is good for us to think of it in terms of responsibility – literally our ability to respond to what God gives to us. For Joan, it really didn't matter what she owned. It is true that she possessed a car and house, and a certain lifestyle. But owning those things isn't what made her happy. She gained a sense of the goodness and joy in life not from acquiring more, but in realizing that she already had everything she needed. She had been given this small, ordinary gift – in this case, the gift of making soup, and something inside invited her to share this with

others. In doing that she found what we might call the kingdom of God – a community where there is life, and giving, and healing, even in the middle of something as terrible as cancer.

The problem with the tenants in this parable is that they stubbornly held onto this idea that they owned the place. We can do with this land as we please, they thought. We can do with the master's servants as we please. We can even do away with his son if we need to, to protect what's ours. These tenants didn't see themselves as mere workers, mere stewards. They were so busy trying to take ownership, they failed to recognize the gifts that they had already been given. They had been given a beautiful vineyard in which to work, with a fence and watchtower to protect them; there was a wine press so they could enjoy fruit of the land. The vineyard had been planted by someone who loved the land, and who cared for them, and was incredibly patient with them. They had everything they needed to produce and enjoy a good harvest. They had been given everything, yet they thought they had to claim it all for themselves, rather than acknowledge it all as gift.

At the end of the parable, the use of the land is simply given to those who will produce a harvest, and then give that harvest away when the time comes. Do you want to know how to live your life? That's it. That's what it looks like to live in the kingdom. The kingdom belongs to those who are invited to receive the gifts from God, and who produce good fruit for the kingdom, and then give it away. You don't need to own anything. It all comes from God. And that is enough. That is abundant. Enough for a rich harvest.

God has placed us in this vineyard. We have been given all we need to produce a good harvest. We have been given the gift of Jesus. We have been given new life in baptism and ongoing life in the Eucharist. We have, this day, all we need to do the

work that God is giving us to do. To put it in the language of a parable, there is a whole lot of fruit God is calling us to produce and give away; there is a whole lot of soup we could be making. May we trust the gifts that God has given to each of us. May we trust that God is with us, and working with us, to give these gifts to others, and to help build the kingdom of God. Amen.

Trace Browning

Proper 22A – 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 5:1-7 • Psalm 80:7-14 • Philippians 3:4b-14 • Matthew 21:33-46

Preached at All Saints Episcopal Church – Salt Lake City, Utah

8 October 2023