

Matthew 21: 33-46 Tending God's Vineyard

First century Palestine was a very agrarian society—life depended upon the tending of crops and flocks, so it is not surprising that many of the stories—parables—which have come to us as teachings of Jesus are based on these things. The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures often used these images to describe the message given to them by God for the people's guidance or their judgment. The people are often referred to as sheep and Israel itself as God's vineyard which has been planted by God and expected to yield "good fruit"; good fruit being defined as a society where justice and righteousness was normative behavior. Today the passage read from Isaiah comes from the prophet's words as he addressed the king and nation while the Assyrian Empire expanded and subjugated Israel as a vassal state. Turmoil was rampant and the king of Judah sought alliances with other powers to defend his nation and his rule—not trusting in God's power to provide safety. Many of the prophet's early words are also oracles or proclamations of judgment on Israel for its failure to act justly and in accordance with the covenant which God had given for guidance. Another Hebrew Scripture reading suggested for today comes from Exodus and contains the fundamentals of those requirements the Lord had given. In Isaiah 5: 1 the prophet says: "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: "My beloved had a 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. In the hill country of Palestine even today you see fields exactly fitting this description. The land is uneven and full of stones. In order to plant it, it must be terraced and the stones removed. You still see the towers in the midst of the fields formed from those removed stones where the vines and the fruit were watched. You can also see the areas where the grapes would have been gathered in order to be crushed. When Jesus begins the parable we read this morning, this passage from Isaiah would have echoed in the minds of the Pharisees and elders to whom Jesus was speaking. They would have also recognized that good fruit was expected as the crop, but the Isaiah passage said the crop was not the desired cultivated grape but instead wild grapes. Following this declaration that the vineyard has failed to live up to expectations, the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah are invited to pass judgment on what has happened. "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?" Here there is no answer, but the next verse tells us of the consequences. "And now I will 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." In other words, the vineyard which did not produce good fruit is going to be destroyed. In the Isaiah passage we have the prophet's designation that the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the people of Judah are the pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!" This parable in Matthew told by Jesus is directed toward the same audience that has just answered the question raised by the parable of the two sons: which son was obedient—the one who agreed but didn't actually go to the vineyard or the one who refused, but later went and worked. Although based in the tradition that the Pharisees knew so well, the parable that Jesus tells is different in many ways. Jesus defines what he says as a parable, so beginning with that; what can we deduce about this story. By definition, in the biblical tradition a parable is a very short story with a double meaning. There is a literal story with which the audience is familiar and there is a message carried within the story which is a metaphor. In the Isaiah

passage the metaphor's explanation tells us that the planter of the vineyard is God while the vines are the people of Judah. Using this explanation, who are the metaphorical figures represented in the parable that Jesus tells? The landowner who plants the vineyard, builds a watchtower, digs a wine press and a fence around it, is still the Lord of hosts. But in Jesus' parable, the landowner does not stay and tend the vineyard—he leases it to tenants and goes to another country. When it is time for the harvest, we are not told what type of grape has been produced. Instead we are told the tenants act violently against the ones sent by the landowner to collect the produce. Since from the Isaiah passage we know that the vines represent the people God has chosen, then who are these tenants? The Pharisees understood that Jesus was speaking of them—they were the ones who were left to tend the vineyard—to teach and guide the people so that the fruit from the vines would be justice and righteousness. What Jesus is teaching is challenging and judging what their tending to the people of God. In describing how the tenants have acted we come to a very dark and violent set of actions by these tenants which give the parable the name found above it in many translations: The Parable of the Wicked Tenants. When the landowner asked them to account for their work, the tenants have responded by beating one, killing another and stoning a third. In fact, this violence against servants of the landowner is repeated again when more are sent. Finally, the landowner decides that he will send his son because the tenants will recognize and respect him. That's not what happens. The son is seized, thrown out of the vineyard and killed. Truly a dark and violent story is being unfolded here. Traditionally, we read this section as what has happened to the prophets God has sent to recall the people to their covenant promises. In the sending of the son and his death at the hands of the tenants, we see the death of Jesus on the cross at the hands of the religious leaders and the Roman oppressors. When at the end of his parable, Jesus again asks his listeners a question, just like at the end of the parable of the two sons, the Pharisees have a ready answer. After recounting the deaths of the landowner's representatives, Jesus asks: "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 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." The Pharisees supply exactly the expected answer that the world always supplies indicating vengeance and violent vengeance at that. But Jesus, as usual neither confirms or corrects what they have said. When we take this parable as it is usually understood as a metaphor for the way God—the landlord—works, then that makes God an absentee landlord. And when he sends his servants to collect his produce—he does not provide them with any protection—and if you take the Pharisees' answer as being how God works, then God acts just like those oppressive landowners of that rule in first century Palestine. Is this the image of God that Jesus has portrayed during his ministry? I don't think so. Yet this image has permeated Christianity—the idea that God would punish the Jewish people for their rejection and actions toward Jesus. This idea has led to centuries of justification of mistreatment of Jews by Christians. It has also led to the concept that we don't have to take revenge because God will do it in time. More violence. Really a depressing vision and not one which brings hope. In the wake of events which took place in Los Vegas, the ominous, inexplicable, seemingly random violence, the violence of this parable could lead to despair as violence seems to win and an alternative way of resolving differences seems beyond our reach—if the Pharisees' answer holds. But think about where Matthew's narrative is leading us. The gospel narrative leads to acts of violence, just like the

parable—the crucifixion—the death of the innocent Son and heir. But the gospel ending is different. The Son sent to us shows us that God is not, has not, will not respond as the Pharisees expect. The image of God and the Kingdom portrayed by Jesus is very different from the kingdoms of this world. Jesus tells us God is kind and generous toward the just and the unjust. For us the kingdom Jesus describes is alien. The world operates on the basis of “do unto others as they have done to you”; but Jesus teaches “do unto others as you want others to do to you.” Very different. God’s kingdom as Jesus describes it operates on a very different basis than the one where we reside. It operates on the basis of God’s unconditional grace and God’s unfailing mercy. In this strange kingdom of God enemies become friends, the operative rule is to forgive as you have been forgiven, to be merciful as you have been shown mercy...there is no more getting even. All of this is because God as the landowner does not, has not, will not return violence for violence. Because whatever we make of the words Matthew records Jesus offering and the Pharisees response—Jesus’ actual deeds are quite different. He does not shrink from the sacrifice on the cross, he does not return with vengeance, he does not kick anyone out of the kingdom of heaven. What is described in this parable seems to be the opposite of what happens under God’s reign. The resurrected Jesus, having taken on the worst that our violence can inflict, comes back and instructs his followers to take the good news of the Gospel to the very ends of the earth, promising to be with them always. God sent his Son, his innocent Son and the love and grace represented in that sending absorbs our violence and responds with life, with resurrection, with Jesus triumphant over death and offering not retribution, but forgiveness and peace. This means that the good news is in part that violence does not and will not have the last word. It shows that the only response to violence is not more violence. That tragedy and death and loss and hatred are, in the end, no match for love and life and forgiveness and peace found in Jesus Christ. We may never know what motivated the gunman in Nevada. There is a lot of work for us to do to reduce the violence in our world. But in the meantime—in the time we live in—the the time between the beginning of God’s reign and its fullness we have the promise that even when it looks like violence is the only outcome and possible response—it’s not. Maybe sometimes that violence is all we can imagine—but there is another way forward. For while Jesus’ words, Matthew’s words, and even our words all matter---Jesus’ deeds matter even more, as Jesus’ death and resurrection creates more possibilities than those we can see, including the possibility of peace. This trust in God’s kingdom does not erase the pain or grief. It does not lessen our call to act to make such atrocities less likely, but it does, in the meantime, offer us hope, and hope is the birthplace of faithful action, compassion and resolve. Thanks be to God.