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Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
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*Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 22A – October 4, 2020
Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80:7-15, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46*

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN

“There is a fable about the Angel Gabriel who has just come from surveying the earth and its inhabitants when he reports to God. ‘Lord, it's my duty to inform you that you're the possessor of a choice piece of real estate known as planet earth. But the tenants you've leased it out to are destroying it. In another few years, it won't be fit to live in. They have polluted your rivers. The air is fouled with the stench of their over-consumerism. They frequently kill one another, and all the prophets you've sent to them calling for an accounting have met with violence. By any rule of sound management, Lord, you've got but one option.’ Then raising his trumpet to his lips, Gabriel asked, ‘Shall I sound the eviction notice now, Lord?’”
Sermons.com, Proper 22A, October 4, 2020.

That fable may pretty clearly describe the mess we’ve made of planet earth, especially the part about how we don’t seem to get along, but Jesus’ parable of the tenants suggests that things weren’t too much better on the planet 2000 years ago. Our Gospel text today continues where we ended last week. We’re in the temple in Jerusalem, during the week between Jesus’ triumphant entry into the city on Sunday and his crucifixion on Friday. In the meantime, he’s driven the moneychangers out of the temple. They were selling sacrificial animals and exchanging Roman money for temple coins to be used for offerings. The chief priests and elders have come upon him teaching people who had come to the temple to worship, and challenged him about the source of his authority to control what happens in the temple and he’s told them that “the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of” them. (Matthew 21:31.)

He continues with another parable. This one was a variation on a familiar parable found in Isaiah’s prophecy. It’s the one we heard as the Old Testament lesson this morning. Jesus’ parable is:

“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. (Matthew 21:33-39.)

Unlike some others of Jesus’ parables, this one is an allegory – a story that represents an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms. The vineyard represents Israel; the landowner represents God; the tenants, the religious leaders to whom God has entrusted Israel. The slaves represent the prophets God sent to the people, who were rejected, and the son represents Jesus.

He concludes this story to the crowd, which now also includes Pharisees (v. 45) with, “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.”

This is a pretty gruesome story; and very violent. Jesus was angry with, or hostile to, the religious leaders of the people (both those inside the temple, like the chief priests, and those whose power was outside the temple complex, but who were leaders because of their education and pious lives, like the Pharisees). Jesús’ anger was driven by their failure to direct the populace to bear “good fruit.” Not the wild (inedible) grapes of the prophetic parable. He considered them to have disregarded their call to lead the people in living lives of justice.

The parable has been interpreted to mean that, after the crucifixion of Jesus, God destroyed the Jews and put gentiles in their place. We know that this isn’t the case: there still are Jews 2000 years later and we still refer to them as “the chosen people.” While the religious leaders of Jesus’ day came to the ends of their lives eventually, God didn’t strike them all down immediately.

The point of the parable is to legitimize the church – Jesus’ followers – and to replace it for the synagogue as “an heir to and interpreter of Israel’s practices, traditions, and faith.” Allen, Jr., O. Wesley, *Matthew* Fortress Press (Minneapolis: 2013), 221.

In fact, Jesus’ followers, although we are known as Christians today, were still Jews in the first century and beyond. They maintained the practices, traditions and faith of Israel, except that they recognized Jesus as the Messiah who had arrived in human form. They stopped being part of the synagogue only when the leaders drove them out of the community of faith because their worship of Jesus the Christ as God the Son was heresy to them.

So it is the church today that stands in the place of the first century religious leaders of the people of Israel. And the vineyard today encompasses all of God’s children, not just Israel.

We all are the church. And we all are called by God to produce good fruit. Our part of the Christian church universal, is the ELCA. We know that the ELCA is primarily led by white-skinned believers, but we’re working today to come to terms with and to try to reverse the injustices that pervade our society.

We inherit the effects of the sin of slavery, and the work of the enslaved people that was used to build this country for more than 200 years. We also inherit the effects of the sins of the intentional undermining of provisions that were designed to reach equality and equity between white and black people during Reconstruction, the period after emancipation. And those old enough to have lived through Jim Crow and the discrimination of segregation and unequal economic opportunity carry the sin of those policies and practices.

Younger people who have not lived as leaders in those times are calling those of us who did, to change how we manage the vineyard, so that good fruit, healthy fruit for all of God’s children is what we produce.

But since we all are the church, there’s work for all of us to do. Young and old. Of all variations of skin color, of all tongues and ethnicities. We start, I think, by speaking truth to power – in love. It may be corrupt power, it may be ignorant or

misguided power. But we must challenge the power that maintains the divisions between families in our one nation of the church universal.

It is my hope that the demonstrations we have seen this spring, summer and now this fall; demonstrations mostly here in the US, but around the world, is the beginning of an unending practice of speaking truth to power until our society really hears the words of the prophets God has sent us for millennia and that we work together to achieve equity of life and opportunity, at least in our homeland.

It's not easy. And it's likely to get harder before it gets easier. I am committed to work and speak out for the freedom and beneficial life that should be enjoyed by all God's children because God has blessed us with a vineyard that is completely equipped to grow only the choicest of fruits. I accept Jesus' challenge to leave the evils of self-serving tenancy behind, and to work hard in the vineyard, for the benefit of all. What is your job in God's vineyard?

Let's pray. You've given us a hard call, Lord. You've loved us into committing our lives to live against human selfishness and fear of others not exactly like us. But at times, it's hard for us to know how to carry out that commitment. At times we feel angry and unloving toward people we think are hindering the wholeness of your people. Give us the strength of courage, Lord. Give us the words, Lord. Give us the love, Lord. In Jesus' name we pray.

C: AMEN