

## 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2020A

Who among us has never yearned for a get-rich-quick scheme that really works? Many of us confine our longing to our daydreams. But some buy lottery tickets and hope against the odds. Others may gamble in casinos on holidays. Still others invest in stocks that promise to yield astronomical profits. Some of us may have even taken correspondence courses to train for up-and-coming fields that allegedly will pay astounding salaries as demand for services increases. The lure of wealth is so great, a very few will even seek their fortune in strategically chosen marriages.

Most of those who seek to get rich quickly will fail miserably. They will lose money, focus, and maybe even family as their obsession overtakes reason and resources. Like most get-rich-quick schemes, the plan of the vineyard tenants in today's parable is wildly improbable. They've been laboring on someone else's land and bringing the grapes to fruition over a season or more. The contract all along has been to turn the harvest over to the landowner when the produce is ready. But as the grapes become more desirable it occurs to the workers that they'd like to keep the harvest for themselves. Why not?

A reasonable person might give a dozen good responses why not. But the tenants, we understand, are not reasonable people. They are greedy people, and greed makes us all stupid when we surrender ourselves to its addictive power. All the tenants can think of is how wonderful it would be to profit from these grapes, to make their own wine, and to hold on to this fertile land indefinitely. They actually talk themselves into the fantasy that they might legitimately possess the land if the son and heir were out of the way. To achieve their ends, they are willing to commit violence, even to become murderers.

These tenants don't only lose perspective. They also lose themselves: their innocence, their good names, and all righteousness due them for the work they once did. Greed turns them into criminals. And far from possessing the dream of wealth, they face the possibility of losing

their very lives in judgment for their actions. So ends the very sad tale of the vineyard tenants.

The story of the tenants is the second of three Matthean parables in a row on the same theme. The first parable we heard last week in the story of the sons who said one thing and did another. The final one we'll hear next week regarding the king's wedding banquet. All three parables are about judgment day and how we are held accountable for the poor choices we make. The circumstances of our failures may be different but the outcome is the same. Sometimes we're simply not true to our promises; at other times we don't live up to basic expectations; there are times when we fail to make an appearance at all. In each of these stories, the result is predictable. The one who is faithful to the call will be rewarded, and the one who does not respond will be sorry.

Jesus did not seek complexity in the stories he told. He preferred clarity, drawing his characters in a few words and sharply outlining their choices. In the parable of the tenants, we meet the landowner and quickly come to an impression of him: determined, purposeful, resourceful, planting his vines and preparing for their nurturing and defense. Then we meet the tenants and come to an ugly and shocking assessment of them. Instead of doing what's expected of them, they abuse their position and the messengers who are sent to them in good faith. The landowner continues to give them chances to show their respect and honor of his request and the tenants consistently demonstrate how dishonorable they are, down to the murder of the owner's son. In the end, the original listeners were forced to come to the same conclusion we arrive at today when we listen to this story: These bad tenants do not deserve sympathy or mercy. They deserve the ultimate retribution for what they did.

The gospel proclamation is by definition good news, so when we hear a passage that seems so dark, we have to look again to find the message of hope. The hope here is in the vineyard itself, the traditional biblical image for God's people. God's people are precious, worth rescuing from Egypt and transplanting to a promised land, as the psalmist tells us. Isaiah's song

of the vineyard that we heard in the first reading reminds us of the trouble God has gone through for the sake of this people, who are variously called “beloved” and “friends” in the Hebrew passage. These words suggest that the vineyard is not mere property to an absentee owner, but dearly cherished by a creator who is more lover than farmer in relationship to this harvest. The disappointment of God is also reported like that of a lover for the unfaithful beloved: anger, rejection, and withdrawal are the results when the bountiful acts of love are neither acknowledged nor reciprocated.

The real tragedy of the tenants’ parable is that these folks schemed to get rich quick, never realizing the wealth that was already theirs. These tenants had been chosen by the vineyard owner to live in the land and care for the beloved vine. It was a privileged position, destined for reward, and they forfeited everything they’d already been given in their irrational quest for more. Clinging to worldly wealth and advantage, we, too, can miss the boundless riches of being the people of God to whom the Kingdom itself is given. If we work for this benevolent Kingdom now, we will share in the joy of the harvest in the world that has no end.

There is a crucial take-away for us to reflect upon from this Gospel passage. How well are we caring for God’s vineyard? Are we truly working for the benevolent kingdom so that everyone can share in the joy of the harvest? Do we practice justice towards neighbours, strangers and enemies alike? Do we join ourselves to Jesus “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free?” How are we doing in showing hospitality to the poor, to welcome sinners and outcasts as friends, and to become the servants of the lowly and downtrodden?

Being good tenants of the vineyard means that we recognize that the poor are honoured guests; where the widowed, orphans, and aliens are served sumptuous portions; where slaves and servants are waited upon by kings and lords; where every wall between masters and slaves, males and females, rich and poor has been torn down. It means becoming a community that practices God’s justice, a justice that shows compassion to the poor, forgiveness to sinners, and love to enemies. It means that we must stand in

solidarity with all the impoverished, marginalized, oppressed, and abused; that we must confront, resist, and dismantle every practice, structure, and system that ignores the cries of the poor or grinds down the world's widowed, orphaned, and alienated. It means supporting all the nobodies and victims being ignored by or trampled underneath our various economic, political, social, and religious structures. It means that we never forget the faces, cries, and sufferings of the hungry, poor, displaced, discouraged, disenfranchised, and desperate millions standing outside our vineyard.

Deacon Gerry

