



COMMUNITY
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

MINISTER
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26TH Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Matthew 21:33-46

No Peace in the Vineyard

The closest I've been to experiencing war was 13 years ago when Monica and I worked for a month at a mission hospital in Sierra Leone, West Africa. While Sierra Leone would soon have its own civil war, at that time the neighboring country of Liberia was in the midst of a civil war. Throughout the country, electric power was scarce and young kids wearing soldiers' uniforms were everywhere. Checkpoints run by people waving AK-47s and grenade launchers were common. There are many experiences on that trip that impressed us deeply. One of the most significant memories for me was not one of the violence but of a particular effort at peacemaking.

The hospital where we worked was way out in a rural area. It was run by Irish nuns who had a particular way of doing things. And while we were there we became aware of something the sisters did not start. It was an early morning prayer service with people of a variety of religious traditions, Muslim, Christian, and native beliefs, who would gather at a tree in the middle of the compound. It was a good sized tree, one that

looked kind of odd right in the middle of the various buildings, but every morning for just a few moments, hospital staff and local villagers would come to offer prayers for peace in their respective traditions. I found it amazing that everyone came to know everyone else's prayer and would pray all the prayers together. Unity, in seeking peace, praying together mattered above all else.

A year after we came home, I felt a thud in my soul as I read a letter that the leaders of the hospital had decided to cut the tree down. The war was still going on. "What were they thinking?!" I said out loud. The meetings were getting out of hand the letter said. People weren't coming in to work on time, and there may have been some illegal things taking place at those early hours under the tree. It sounded to me, more like the leadership wasn't ready to let the spirit take hold in a new way, in a way that brought in differing people, and perhaps would take off in unknown directions. So out of fear, they made a drastic move to keep a sense of power or control in their

hands. It was sad to hear. And a year later the Europeans were driven out and the hospital was destroyed by Sierra Leoneans who were helped by some working at the hospital.

I don't tell that story as a parallel to our scripture. It is not. I share it because the question of "What were they thinking?" comes to our lips easily these days as we encounter people and nations acting in strange ways. It may be said in response to minor incidents of absent mindedness or said in exasperation at seeing violent criminals on the news and wondering what could they possibly have been thinking to lead them to drive a bomb into a building, or shoot an innocent bystander.

The parable before us asks the question of "what were you thinking?", or more specifically "what motivates your actions?", as we encounter tenants farmers who turn on their landlord. To begin with, it should be noted that this is not a parable about an oppressive, wealthy landlord who is exploiting tenant workers. It is about people who are trying to seize control of what is not theirs, trying to assume a role that is not theirs, and the horrible actions they are willing to commit in an effort to get that control.

Jesus is addressing two distinct groups in the crowd that have gathered to hear him. One is the followers who have been with him for some time and learning from him. The other group is the religious leaders, who have been challenging his authority, and are looking for ways to silence him. Jesus has just responded to the Pharisees immediately

before this story and he is now addressing the crowds. He is talking about the religious leaders, and not to them at this point, speaking of how they misuse their power and have lost sight of working in God's vineyard and not their own. This is not lost on the Pharisees, as we read later in this chapter, they knew he was talking about them. They saw themselves in what he was saying.

What is difficult for us today, is to realize the Pharisee in each one of us. The tendency to think or do as the workers in the vineyard did, to do as the Pharisees did. Trying to control that which is not ours, and not be concerned with consequences it brings.

As Jesus tells the parable, he stops and asks, "what do you think the landowner did when he returned?" The response comes "gave those miserable wicked tenants the death they deserve and then rented the fields to others, who will pay what is due." Jesus does not say they are right. He instead says, have you not read scripture? And they see how they are being judged.

The images of judgment that come from both passages today are fearful in one sense, but in another light they can be understood as blessings, as the road to reconciliation. In Isaiah we see what seems to be a threat from God, even a death sentence, "what the Lord is looking for is justice, and what he found was bloodshed, what he expected was righteousness but he heard a cry!" It is not a sentence, but rather part a larger cycle, in which destruction is part of creation. Letting things waste and die is part of creation.

Judgment is never meant to be the final word, it is the first word that says, things are not right, something needs to be changed. Go and do something differently. That is what judgment is. It is the naming and recognition of shortfalls. It is the call to change, to begin again.

And isn't that the way real change happens, when we realize the implications of our actions, when we stand in honest confrontation with ourselves and acknowledge the effects of what we do. When our guts sink and we get a lump in our throat we know that something must change. We all need to encounter ourselves in this light and be open to the call to change some of our actions or attitudes. As we look inward, we will find places in our lives that we have been like the wicked slaves, instead of good stewards.

We have been given a great deal by God to take care of, and we must not give in to the temptation to seize what is not ours. Or there will be no peace in the vineyard. Matthew is a Jew writing to fellow Jews and calling them to a new way of thinking, to repentance. This story lifts up an examples attitudes and dispositions that damage not enhance relationships with others and God. The Pharisees thought they could build a fence around the faith and control who was right with God. They wanted to have too much say in how the fruits of creation were distributed. They wanted to be able to do as they pleased with what they had been entrusted with. And that's where they went wrong.

They gave in to the idea, to the desire, to put themselves first and deny God's place in their lives. Matthew's passage is not one to say that the Kingdom of God will be taken from the Jews and given to the Gentiles, it is saying that God's promise was being taken out of the exclusive control of the legalists and hypocrites who ruled the governmental and religious establishment. God's promise was now being opened and given freely to all those who would love one another and do justice, not by the letter of the law but by the spirit. To many this does not make sense.

The land owner sends servants to the vineyard who are mistreated and killed. In response he does not call in the guards, or have the tenants destroyed. Then he does an amazing thing - he sends his son. We may well ask, "what was this landowner thinking, was he crazy or what?" It is the "or what" that is our salvation. The "or what" is the willingness of God to break the cycle of vengeance and violence, it is the grace of God, that chooses to do things in a new way, that is our only hope.

What do we think the landowner will do when he returns? What will he do with all those wicked ones? He will send his son, who will set a table of grace before us, inviting us to feast. He will raise the Son from death, giving hope to all. He will send Holy Spirit to pursue hardened hearts until they are turned around and they are able to feel the love of God. A desire to be good stewards will be planted, so that they are free to worship and celebrate. And then loving them even more, the landowner will send the Son to join them in living and worshiping.

This is the Lord's Table. Not a Presbyterian, Methodist, or Catholic, it is God's and we are invited, with the whole world to come. Making Peace. Amen.