**Sermon: Lost in the Vineyard**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 5:1-7, Matthew 21:33-46**

We have two related stories here today, and it's an interesting situation in that Matthew very much borrowed from Isaiah: a man planted a vineyard, set a fence or a hedge around it, dug a pit for a winepress, and built a watch tower. Then the parable takes a sharp turn when some wicked tenants refuse to give the owner what they owe him, which was the fruit of the vineyard, the harvest.

The parable Jesus told involves an absentee landowner and some troublesome tenants. It's a metaphor about God's claim to receive the fruits of righteousness from the people, but that claim led to such a violent reaction that the tenants killed the landowner's representatives and eventually his son and heir.

Matthew pointed out that when the tenants seized the son, they threw him out of the vineyard before they killed him. Notably, Jesus was killed outside Jerusalem.

Mark and Luke tell the same story but with different details. Everything in this part of Matthew's Gospel, from Jesus entering Jerusalem at the beginning of the chapter, to the middle of the next chapter when the Pharisees begin plotting to entrap Jesus, says something about the attitude of Jesus' followers to his ministry and authority.

The Pharisees, who heard the parable, had no intention of changing their ways despite knowing the story was about them.

Jesus made his listeners finish the parable, and then he asked them if they had never read in Scripture, in Psalm 118, that:

> 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the *capstone*;
> this was the LORD'S doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.'

Jesus, as the rejected stone, gives offense, then and now, to those who ought to have welcomed him, and they will lose the kingdom of God as a result.

But the capstone of Jesus' resurrection crowns his ministry of salvation, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, so to speak.

Back in the last century, I rented a series of apartments, usually for a year or two but sometimes longer. The first one, for example, I rented for about four years. The landlord lived in the next town over and he liked to fix things himself, like the time the water heater sprung a pinhole leak. He came right over and devised a plug for it that held for a time. That was fine until my downstairs neighbor came home to find the back entryway filled with steam because the water heater was merrily doing its job even though the tank had finally split.

You would have thought that a hands-on landlord like this one would be poking around all the time, making a nuisance of himself, but he was actually pretty cool, and we never had any trouble. He just came around when we needed him. In return, we paid our rent on time and shoveled the driveway in the winter.

The landlord for my last apartment lived upstairs, taking care of the house as needed. Stuff got done while I was at work; it was like magic. Except for his toddler daughter flipping the boiler off and on whenever her mom did the laundry in the basement, we never had any problems. And duct tape solved that one.

In between, there were several landlords that I never saw. In one long-term house rental, when things went wrong, it was me who very reluctantly would end up dealing with them, or my roommates would generously let me deal with them. The landlord would reimburse me for expenses and repairs, but otherwise, we had no contact.

In that sense, life was peaceful. But I was more of a caretaker than a renter. I left the place in better shape than I found it, and I knew things about the house that the owner didn't. When I left, I felt a little sad.

And then he rented the place to someone else and got himself some new tenants.

We can see in the Isaiah reading how Matthew used it as a source, but there are key differences: here, the vineyard planter is on-site, and the trouble is with the vineyard itself.

And though the word *vineyard* is a standard metaphor for a *lover* in Israelite poetry, this is not a love song. What it is, is a parable and a judgement oracle.

The beloved did everything right: he cleared a fertile hill of stones and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the middle of the field and dug a wine press. What he got in return was unrequited love.

It starts out as a song sung by the prophet on behalf of his friend, then the voice shifts to the prophet's friend who speaks directly to the people of Jerusalem and Judah. Telling it that way can be confusing, because we expect one thing and get another, which is sort of the point.

And then the prophet's friend asks the people to help him judge between him and the vineyard in the same way Jesus asked his listeners to finish the parable. And since the vineyard is the people, they will end up judging themselves.

But before they can answer, the owner tells them what he is going to do, and it won't be pretty. By now, we know who is speaking.

In the final verse, we learn that the vineyard belongs to the LORD of hosts and the vineyard is a metaphor for God's people. We also learn the meaning of the song.

God expected justice from the vineyard but saw bloodshed. God expected righteousness but heard iniquity in the cries of the oppressed. Those words – *justice* and *bloodshed*, *righteousness* and *iniquity* –are very close to each other in Hebrew;[1] which may be the point, and the song ends with something for us to think about.

The lectionary pairs these readings because they have been read and interpreted together for perhaps a thousand years.

There's a difference between solving a problem and removing it.

In the passage from Isaiah, the vineyard – God's people – did not do what God expected, so God replanted the vineyard. In Matthew, the tenants resented having to give over any of the fruit of the vineyard to God, so God started over with new tenants.

God is a problem solver. In Isaiah, the harvest in the vineyard didn't work out. God expected one thing – justice over bloodshed – and didn't get it.

The landowner leased his vineyard to some tenants and then *went to another country*, what we would call an absentee landlord. But is that true? Is God really an absentee landlord?

Or did the tenants simply not appreciate what God had done in planting the vineyard and leasing it to them?

Apparently, God *was* watching and we know God is not averse to starting over. We see that throughout Scripture.

By reading these two passages side by side, we can see that we are both the vineyard and the tenants – not the ones that failed to do what God expected, but the next generation, or the generation after that, or the next one, or the next.

How many times will God replant the vineyard or find new and better tenants? Jesus would say seventy times seven times.

We are called to tend the LORD'S vineyard and make it productive. That's our job: to love and serve the LORD.

The harvest belongs to God, and it is what we owe to the LORD for our lives.

Amen.

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[1] 'God looked for *mišpāṭ* (justice), behold *mispāḥ* (bloodshed); for *ṣᵉdāqāh* (righteousness), behold *ṣᵉāqāh* (iniquity).' Brevard S. Childs. *Isaiah*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 45.