

## Who's Vineyard?

Proper 22, Year A – Matthew 21:33-43

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, October , 2014*

Lord, take my eyes and see through tem. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

In this morning's Gospel lesson, Jesus tells yet another parable to the muckity-mucks hanging around the Temple, the Scribes and the Pharisees, the elite, the top of the heap, the most pious people of the city. Over the course of the last few weeks, we have heard one story after another as Jesus tries to point out to these self-righteous people the real message of the Kingdom of God. So today Jesus says, "Listen to *another* parable."

It seems there was this wealthy man who had some land with potential. At considerable expense and over a considerable period of time, this landlord turned the plot into a vineyard. He walled in the plot to protect his investment. He tilled the soil and laid out the young plants. As the vines began to grow, he built arbors and trellis to support them. He installed a state-of-the-art wine press and assembled all the necessary equipment for harvesting the crop and turning it into a marketable commodity. All that having been accomplished, the landlord puts the operation in the hands of competent tenants while he heads off to look after *another* of his business concerns.

Time passes until the first commercially profitable harvest and the landlord sends one of his servants to collect his portion from the vineyard. But when the servant gets back, instead of bringing his expected cut of the profits, he returns with only the bruises that the tenants have rained down on him. What's more, the next servant didn't come back at all.

"What's the deal," the landlord thinks, and we think right along with him. I mean, whose vineyard is it anyway?

But wait a sec'. Maybe it's not as clear-cut as all that. Imagine for a moment the view from the *tenant's* side of the situation. The *tenants* were the ones who tended the vines over the course of several seasons until they got mature enough to produce grapes. *They* maintained the walls and stood watch at night to repel intruders. When the time came, *they* picked the grapes and hauled basket after basket after basket through the scorching heat of the day and dumped them into the wine press. *They* crushed the grapes, carefully processed them to make the wine and meticulously filled the wineskins. *They* arranged for storage and *they* contracted for shipment and *they* found qualified buyers.

Time passes, and the first year they actually turn a profit, here comes someone who *claims* to be from the landlord and says that they have to give him a percentage of *their* hard-earned produce. Well, forget it! After all, hadn't the owner essentially abandoned the property, catching a ship or a donkey or a camel or a whatever to some whole other country? *They* had done all the work. Besides, how did they know that this fellow is even really *from* the landlord anyway? Better to give this joker a lesson and send him packing.

I mean, whose vineyard is it anyway?

Jesus's immediate audience – you remember, all those muckity-mucks at the temple – they were quite sure *they* knew. The law was clear that the landlord was the proper owner, and these folks Jesus was talking to were undeniably experts on the law. They knew every paragraph, every line, every jot and tittle of the law. So when Jesus asked them, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" these guys were quick to lay down the law: the landlord was perfectly within his rights to, "put those wretches to a miserable death."

But of course, Jesus wasn't talking about real estate law, so his learned listeners missed the real point entirely. The real question is not, "What *rights* does the owner have?" The real question is, "Whose vineyard is it, anyway?"

We've heard this story before. Some of us heard it in Sunday school, perhaps with flannel-graph figures, if we're old enough to know what those are. Most of us are regular enough in our church attendance to have at least heard this story a time or two when it comes up in the Sunday morning cycle. We know this story, at least sort of, and we know that Jesus was telling this parable to his Jewish listeners to remind them that they had been *entrusted* with the faith that they had inherited from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, (and perhaps from their mothers, Sarah, Rebekah and Rachael as well) they had been *entrusted* with the faith, but they did not have a claim to that faith outside their *relationship* with the Almighty.

Our own first inclination, though, even *knowing* all that, is to respond like the people Jesus was talking to. Like them, we focus on how absolutely horrid the tenants in this story are. We look at the tenants and feel perfectly right in saying with Jesus's first listeners, "Trash 'em!" And in doing so, we fall into the same trap as those Scribes and Pharisees. We see these really awful tenants and we say, "No *wonder* they got thrown out." And we see the religious leaders of Jesus's day and we say, "Of *course* God took his kingdom away from those hypocrites and gave control of the vineyard of his grace over to the Church." But we end up identifying with the tenants after all, you know, the *new* tenants, the ones that *aren't* in the story yet, the ones that took over when the landlord cleaned house, the ones that did a *much* better job managing things, when the vineyard was *theirs*.

But wait a minute... whose vineyard is it, anyway?

If we get to thinking that that vineyard has passed to new ownership, we're *still* missing the point. We still miss the point until we fully realize that we are tenants in *God's* vineyard. We still miss the point until we realize that everything we see and touch and hear, until we realize that everything we have, until we realize that everything we *are*, or could possibly hope to *become*, belongs not to *ourselves*, but to God. My family and my friends. My treasure, my time, my talents. My thoughts and my ideas. My daily labor – and even my lunch hour and my overtime and my vacation. Everything I do, and everything I say, and everything that *comes* from it... belongs to God.

Whose vineyard is it, anyway, when we're talking about the fruit of our own labors? Do we cling to the idea that \$20 a week, or a couple hundred a month, or even some percentage – not to exceed *ten* percent, of course – belongs to God and the rest is ours to do with whatever we want? Or do we understand that the vineyard is *God's* – that *everything* we have is God's, given for our benefit and use, and that we can never out-give the one who has given us everything?

Whose vineyard is it, anyway, when we're talking about all those *people* who are part of our life? Do we operate as though it is acceptable, because it is just part of the way that it is, to use or even *abuse* the people around us? Do we hold it as our right to coax, cajole, and control others to meet our own needs or achieve our own desires? Or do we understand that the vineyard is *God's* – that every person whose life touches ours... that *every* person, whether they are our along our path for the fleetest moment, or whether they have entrusted their own *lives* to us... that every person, regardless how much or how little we seem to share in common... that every person, regardless how far they are from our point of view... do we understand that *every* person is a child of the living God whose care and dignity we are called to guard and respect?

Whose vineyard is it, anyway, when we're talking about our faith? Do we build fences around *our* Church to keep out those who may disagree with us and repel the hypocrites and the heretics... and perhaps a prophet? Or do we understand that the vineyard is *God's* – that the grace of God is freely given to every sinner that calls upon the name of Jesus Christ, and that the gate through which *we* were

welcomed with open, nail-scarred hands, is only a gate to the true vineyard, only so long as it remains an *open* door?

Whose vineyard is it, anyway? We are *God's* people, working in *God's* world. We are called to remember, in the words of one of the old prayers from the Prayer Book, that "our commonwealth is in heaven..." and that while we are here on earth, we are *tenants* in this wonderful vineyard. Let us strive to be *good* tenants. Let us strive to offer to God the portion that *is* God's... you know, *everything*. Let us strive with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, to be faithful to the Lord of the vineyard!