



“A Violent Vineyard”
16th Sunday after Pentecost
Oct. 2, 2011
Text: Matthew 21:33-46

Prayer: “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may know your truth.” -- Psalm 86:11

So here we are. Back in the vineyard – again. One would think by now that Matthew would have moved to a new location for these vine-y parables of Jesus. Matthew does not. He instead stays in a familiar location.

Two weeks ago, Matthew’s Gospel was about fair wages for the workers in the vineyard. We heard also about the incredible, mind boggling concept of God’s mercy being wider than we can even begin to imagine. Last week, we returned to the vineyard with the story of the two sons and the question of who did what their father asked them to do, and a question of who was right and who was wrong. Today, we hear and read of another parable in a vineyard – a vineyard whose very fruits create a conflict between the landlord and the tenants.

First, a word about vineyards in Bible times. Owning a vineyard in Bible times was huge. It could be comparable to owning the Boardwalk property in the game of Monopoly: once you own Boardwalk, you don’t want to sell it. Nor do you want to land on it – especially if any of the other players also own Park Place!

Owning a vineyard in Bible times meant you were perhaps a little wealthier than your neighbor. It meant you could afford land. Not only that, but the vineyard was property that was kept within the family.

In the story of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21), Naboth owned a vineyard that King Ahab wanted. The vineyard was next to the king’s palace, and closer to where the king wanted a vegetable garden. Naboth refused to give the king the vineyard. Naboth recognized that not only would he lose the profit from the vineyard, but he would also give up property that had been in his family for some time. Jezebel, Ahab’s wife had other plans for the vineyard. She made sure that Naboth was out of the picture before telling Ahab the news. When Ahab went to claim what was not rightfully his, he was greeted by Elisha, who spoke severe and harsh words to Ahab.

For Matthew, it is entirely possible that the owner planted the vineyard, got it started, and then hired others to care for the vineyard before returning home to another section of the Roman Empire. “Absentee” ownership was common during that time.

There is something about vineyards that attract people even today. Parts of America are known for its vineyards: Napa Valley, California and Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts to name a few. Even Lancaster has a few wineries that are on a trail between York and Lancaster

counties – at least so I have been told! Wine tasting at local wineries allows a chance to taste different grapes, different years, different combinations. During the summer months, several local vineyards sponsor music in the vineyard as a way of inviting people in to enjoy, to sample, to experience the beauty of a vineyard.

But today in our return, it is not a pleasant trip. Instead, we are in a vineyard soaked by violence. Servants and slaves are fatally attacked. More servants are sent, only to receive the same fate as those of the first. Eventually, the landowner sends his son, thinking the tenants will respect the son. The son is met with the same fate as the slaves. The tenants hope that IF there is no son, no heir, then one day, they will be the ones receiving the inheritance of the vineyard.

This is part of Matthew's Gospel that leaves me wishing I had a chance to talk to the landlord. I would want to ask the landlord the second time he sends his slaves to claim the fruit of the vineyard, "What are you thinking?" "Were you not paying attention the first time? Is the fruit of the vineyard really worth risking the life of your slaves? What makes you think they will listen to your slaves a second time?" Nor does the landlord use eminent domain or any other form of force. The landlord simply assumes the tenants will listen to his son.

In telling this story, Jesus asks his audience a different question. He asks, "what *will* the owner of the vineyard do to the tenants when he comes?"

Those who hear this question respond without hesitation, "he will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants."

Only as the crowd answers do they begin to realize that Jesus has told the story about them. The religious leaders of the Israelites, the very ones chosen by the Lord God himself to be the people of God, the very same one who promised to write the law of God upon their hearts and minds, who in turn have forgotten these very same promises, are now the tenants who refuse to yield the harvest of the vineyard.

This does not make the Pharisees, scribes, or elders happy in the least! Matthew places this exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem, near the end of Jesus' ministry. In this story, Jesus is predicting His own death in being the Son of the landowner who has come to collect all of the fruit from the vineyard. The religious leaders of the day want to arrest Jesus, but they cannot because others in the crowd view Jesus as a prophet. And so they wait – and plot for the "right" moment in which they can arrest Jesus.

But there remains an unasked question in today's parable. Jesus asks what *will* the landlord do? The unasked question is what *did* the landowner do? The landowner, who is God, sent His Son into the world to come into the world. Like the tenants in the parable, the world turned its back on the Son, choosing violence rather than peace, choosing to do their own thing rather than walking in paths of righteousness.

The choice continues to be ours, whether we faithfully tend the piece of the vineyard we have been given, or if we violently hold out for that which we think we are entitled to.

May God who is merciful and just, continue to grant us courage and strength to tend the vineyard we have been given, this day and always.

Amen.