

October 4, 2020

**“Tending the Vineyard”
Sermon by Rev. Ron Newlin**

Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 5:1-7

*Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watch-tower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.*

*And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.
What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?*

*And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.*

*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!*

Matthew 21:33-46

‘Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.’

*Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the scriptures:
“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes”?’*

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.’

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Someone gave me a copy of a book a couple of years ago, with the rather grotesque title of “Killing Jesus”. At last my reaction was that it was a rather grotesque title. I didn’t want anything to do with that book. It was written by a very well-known newscaster, one whose views on most things do not coincide with mine, and I had never looked at it. As it came time for preparing for this sermon, I picked it up and looked at it. I thought perhaps it would have something helpful to go along with the parable that Chelene read for us this morning. “Finally He sent his son, saying ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said

to themselves, “this is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” Killing Jesus!! It was good thinking. Surely there will be something in a book with that title that will be helpful. In fact, that was the title given to this sermon, all the way up to Thursday morning, when I stopped in to see Carrie and changed it.

“Killing Jesus” was not a bad book. In fact, it had several redeeming qualities, but wasn’t about this parable, nor did it contain anything that could be pulled out and used for the concept of “the son of the landowner, who was killed by those who were tasked with tending the Vineyard.” It was a historical detail of the facts and the personalities who were a part of the original plot to kill Jesus, way back in the first century, when Jesus was crucified. And it was a good and accurate presentation of those people and of Jesus himself. If you wanted to know something about the people that you hear mentioned in the Gospel account, and try to understand them better, this book provided it. All about Herod The Great, Herod Antipas, Caesar Augustus, Pontius Pilate, and so forth. Tiberius. All were portrayed in a way that drew out their human-ness, not necessarily in positive ways, but in realistic ways. Especially was this true of Jesus, the man of Galilee, who burst on the scene, who preached and taught and got himself in difficulty with the Religious leaders, which got him in trouble with the ruling authorities, and eventually He was killed because of it. “Killing Jesus” was going to be the theme that I intended to take up as the theme for my sermon, and those tenders of the vineyard, who had decided to kill the Son of the vineyard owner, and then the events of the week intervened.

What a week it has been!! If you back the week up to last Friday, Amy Coney Barrett was nominated for a seat on the Supreme Court. The Packers played in the New Orleans bowl, and played well. The Brewers contended for a chance to play in The World Series. Short and Sweet.

Oh, and there was a presidential debate. Two gentlemen who were selected from among the population of Americans, each from within a group known as a political party, were placed on stage in a debate style and given the chance to discuss some of their hopes and dreams and their plans for the future of America, and ended up creating a colossal, embarrassing train wreck!!

And late on Friday afternoon we watched as the President left the White House, boarded Marine Helicopter #1 and was taken to Walter Reed Hospital, with Covid 19. And then lined up all of the news media, reporting two vastly different stories about how the President was doing and about the ramifications of what they were hearing. Each news source trying extremely hard to put a spin on what their particular party wanted to hear. If you didn’t stay tuned in all week, you soon wouldn’t know what was going on!!

I admire Susan’s preaching style. How she can pull from out of the text a thought and weave it into her life and so preach a message that relates to our life. She truly has a gift and is using it well. But I am sure that she would say, if she were here today, “I didn’t want to give you another political sermon.”

But maybe it’s not a political sermon, Maybe it’s a good way of reminding ourselves who we are and to whom we belong. Perhaps it is Jesus smashing in on our drama of the week, with a story that he clearly borrowed from the book of Isaiah, and those words with which he ended:

“The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produce the fruits of the Kingdom.”

I was teaching a confirmation class one day, shortly before leaving New England, carefully following the curriculum. The lesson for this day was explaining the Kingdom of God. Each student was asked to draw a kingdom, whatever they chose. Just draw a kingdom. And they did. Most of those kingdom renditions looked like an island. Just an outline with perhaps some trees, maybe some buildings scattered around. The pictures looked just like a kingdom.

The second question was to describe something about its governing system. Who are the leaders, how are they chosen, or are they members of a monarchy and their birth defines how they will participate in the line of succession. The last question was “what are the rules by which all of the people will live together?”

This was a good way to get these middle-schoolers involved in the project and in a way that was real enough to make them feel a part of it. Most middle-school students will say they don’t want any rules; they don’t want any leaders telling them what to do and when to do it. Most middle-schoolers will not want any kind of formal government or anybody writing rules for them and telling them what to do-- and they didn’t, but when the lesson drew to its logical conclusion, one of them offered this: “There are only two rules in the Kingdom of God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. And your neighbor as yourself.”

It is as though in our super fractured, super divided country there exists a third dimension which is the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom that operates only by two rules and consistently yearns to love and care for all of its citizens.

Have you ever noticed how many of your big decisions are made by the party to which you belong, and the degree to which that decision lies in accord with the beliefs that party holds. (I guess that is what is meant by ‘identity politics’, but that’s another one of those things that I don’t quite understand, and how both sides can accuse the other of being subject to it.) How at this time of the year those signs proclaiming who you support seem to mysteriously grow out of the soil on your lawn (my wife and I have never had a political sign in our yard, and I think I finally realized why!!). Perhaps we should have one printed that reads “all decisions made here are in accord with the rules established for the Kingdom of god” or something to that effect. And there is something about saying that, that kind of sticks in my throat and makes me want to retract it.... Yet that ought to be our strongest statement!!!

The best political satire that I heard all week was the quick quip “Looks like RBG just won her first case before God.” Now that was said in other contexts and for other reasons, so I will retract that one, but that is where you need to argue your case, for when you argue BEFORE GOD, you are properly given homage to that allegiance of belonging to the Kingdom of god.

This is the hope by which we live. This is the path that will take us out of this distorted mess that has been made of our country.

On this day, when God’s people have gathered around the world, and yet will gather from East to West, that we are to be reminded of that to which we have pledged our allegiance.

God has placed His claim on you and in fact has hired you to “Tend the Vineyard”, and the Son of the owner stands in the middle of this divide, with his hands stretched out over all of history, and repeats “you shall love the lord your God, with all of your soul, and all of your heart, and all of your mind, and all of your strength, and your neighbor as yourself.”

