

Making Whine in the Vineyard

16TH Sunday After Pentecost

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Text: Matthew 20

So, for this sermon today, let's leave God out of it – OK? - I thought that might at least get your attention. It may sound odd or even scandalous to leave God out of a sermon, but what I actually mean to say that about is this parable – the parable of the vineyard that we heard Jesus tell in Matthew – the story of the vineyard and the owner and the laborers – the story of the unorthodox wage-paying practices of the owner. What I'm saying about this parable is, let's leave God out of it as a character in the story, and see how it speaks to us then. That would be a big shift from the way I have typically read and heard others reflect on this parable – because when you look at this parable, it seems quite simple to figure out who is who, or at least who the vineyard owner is: clearly this represents God, using this unusual wage system; and once we identify the vineyard owner with God, then which of the workers you or I see ourselves or others as is part of what keeps it interesting - but it all starts with God as the vineyard owner and plays out from there.

But I realized this week that I have a problem with that – and the problem was not with the parable or the interpretation - the problem is me – the problem is that I am too comfortable – too comfortable hearing the parable this way. With my own particular place on the theological spectrum, I'm very pleased to hear about a vineyard owner who treats everyone unexpectedly well – it's a parable I can use to justify my own universalist tendencies of God's inclusive love for all; and while I'm at it, I can then use the grumbling workers as an opportunity to critique others who have less open and progressive views than I do. It all works out very well for me – very comfortably.

The problem is, I don't believe Jesus told parables to make me comfortable, or anyone else for that matter. Certainly there are parables that have softer edges, and some that are plenty harsh already, but what I believe Jesus is up to in using parables as a teacher and preacher, is shifting people out of their usual view of things (of self, of others, of God, of life) and interjecting a different vision – a vision that Jesus calls 'the kingdom of heaven' – not a heaven first about the future or afterlife, but the heaven of God's ways present on earth. Sometimes that shift is more subtle, sometimes it is a jolt, but it is always a way of challenging, changing, opening the listener to a different paradigm – and such a shift is always uncomfortable in some way.

So, I decided that my challenge in listening to this parable was to have it make me uncomfortable! – and in the process, to cause you some discomfort too, just to be clear about my intentions. And the best way I could come up with to do that, was - as I said at the start - to leave God out of this parable - to listen to this parable instead as a story which simply speaks all about about us - about human beings and the relationships among us; a parable in which Jesus offers an image of what those relationships look like in this peculiar reality called the kingdom of heaven. So, if we do that for this parable – with God out of it - then where would you see yourself in it? I think we could try on all the different roles – the vineyard owner; the long-laboring workers; the last minute laborers who are paid full wages – and see what each evokes – that is good to do.

But I'd like to focus on the character of the vineyard owner – because it struck me that this character was the place of greatest disruption, discomfort in the story – and here's why: at first read, it's actually a pretty cool role to take on, with the vineyard owner doling out all the surprisingly generous wages, and then dealing with the whine of the laborers with that clever turn of phrase: 'is your eye evil because I am good?'- 'are you envious of my generosity?' – it's a cool role, that is, for God. But if I step into that role, if I'm the vineyard owner then I start to have some questions, some concerns...because is this really any way to run a vineyard?...it might make me look generous for a day, but it's hardly an economically sustainable model...it's not practical, it's not even fair. I mean, what's better for everyone in the long run: that I lavishly dole out full pay to part-timers, or that I manage this vineyard responsibly for the long haul? Just maybe those “whining” full-time laborers are the real voice of wisdom here – they know it's no good for anyone if the vineyard goes bankrupt.

And the reason that I suddenly have so many concerns when I take on that role, is because I can feel in my gut what this is really talking about – I can feel deep in my soul, that this isn't about vineyards and wages at all; this is about a vision of life in which people are treated not by what they deserve, but instead by generosity. It is an uncomfortable feeling, because I realize I am being challenged to do something which is difficult for me – to put aside what is correct, and practical, and sustainable, and fair, and justifiable...and instead approach those who deserve nothing from me with a generosity of spirit, with dignity and humanity. This parable very much echoes the words of Jesus that Pastor Jill lead us through last week – 'forgiving 77, 70x7, times' – a view of life that does not calculate what is deserved but instead is nurtured by an insistent, persistent, generosity of spirit toward others. Now this is complicated, for all the circumstances we know of victims and injustice and harm in life that should not be set aside – and there is nothing here that meant to diminish or

push aside such realities. But what is given here is a deeply personal claim that each person has power in their life to never have taken from them a spirit that seeks the good, wants the good for others, no matter what – a refusal to be embittered by life or to be trapped by the practicalities of life - a choice of generosity of spirit that is yours to carry out in your life. It is empowering in that way – and it is very difficult; Lord, have mercy – I fail at it every day. I fail at it in the ways I talk about and think about others; fail at it in my relationships with family and friends, with this congregation, with you...it is so difficult to put aside my correctness, my sense of what is justifiable and fair – so difficult not to lead with what I think people deserve from me...and instead to start with, and start over and over and over again with, a generous spirit – wanting the best for, wanting abundance for, another. I fail at that every day – but I am encountered by this story, so I will keep trying – a choice of generosity and abundance to carry out in my life. And you know, as difficult as that is for me, the funny thing is that it occurs to me that this is very much the way I want others to treat me - not with what I deserve, but with generosity and grace. Which helps me to see, to believe, that as a vineyard owner, none of us will go bankrupt from generosity.

You could say about this sermon that it is a very personal, individual-focused message – about the way you and I make choices in our lives. I look at all that is going on in our world – so much turmoil, so much need – and although as an individual I can feel powerless, I do think there is something important in still focusing on, renewing, who I am as a person of faith in Jesus Christ, how I will treat others. But, let's not sell this parable short either – because even as I focus on the personal, there is at the same time something very broad, even global being expressed in this parable too. This not just a personal shift in vision – but a paradigm to bring to community and politics, to economics and ethics, to nations and laws. Because all of those webs of relationships in our lives are deeply embedded in a 'get what you deserve' paradigm, vision, of life – it is so embedded, we may even assume that 'get what you deserve' is true. It is not true. The way we look at our economics, at our care for children and elderly, at our relationships of nations, education, health care – it does not have to be about 'you get what you deserve.' It can be founded instead on a vision of generosity that realizes that the good of the other is the good of you. Look around at this world – how is a "you get what you deserve" vision for life working out? - perhaps our world needs to hear a parable about a vineyard – hear it in a way that causes discomfort, and that calls for different choices about how to operate the vineyards of this world. The very personal can become very global very quickly.

I said at the start of this sermon that today we would leave God out of this parable – and I think that is good to do for some creative discomfort. But the beauty is that even as we leave God out of the parable, God is present in the storyteller, embodying the very vision of life that the story expresses. In Jesus, God disrupts the story line of this world – disrupts ‘get what you deserve’, disrupts cautious practicality, disrupts order and fairness – and embodies a generosity of life that is individual and global in its reach. Lots of people told Jesus – ‘you can’t do things that way!’ – that’s what people will tell you, us, too. Well, that is the very kind of whine, the reaction, that we should be getting from others in this vineyard of life; to which we can simply offer for them to join in the vision of generosity – it is uncomfortable, it is good, it is the way of the kingdom of heaven.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.