The Beautiful Vineyard

October 2, 2005 (Proper 22, Year A)

Isaiah 5:1-7 Psalm 80 Philippians 3:14-21 Matthew 21:33-43

The kingdom of God will be given to those who produce good fruit at the harvest time.

What made Jesus such an excellent and powerful storyteller was that he knew his audience. A few weeks ago, Matthew's gospel has Jesus speaking to his disciples – impoverished women and men, fishermen, tenant farmers, prostitutes and the homeless. People who had no resources to support themselves, women and men who depended on patrons and landowners.

Jesus tells them a story that we heard two Sundays ago, about a landowner who paid all his workers generously, even the ones who were hired only in the last hour. It is a story of mercy and generosity and of hope for people who so needed to know mercy and generosity and hope.

But in today's gospel, Matthew sets a very different scene. Jesus is speaking to the ranking priests and administrators at the Temple. Men who are in positions of some power and wealth, who live in the capital city, who have servants and slaves, perhaps even sharecroppers and tenant farmers of their own.

Last week, we heard Jesus accuse the priests of being people who talked the talk but didn't walk the walk. This week, Jesus continues to accuse the priests by trapping them with the story of the vineyard and the wicked tenants. As men of some wealth, they are quick to leap to the defense of the landowner.

I imagine the landless peasants who followed Jesus would have heard the story differently: Why should an absentee landowner have such rights to all the produce of the vineyard? But the priests and elders heard a story of lost income and working-class violence. Stumbling over themselves to call the tenants "miserable wretches," they are hoisted on their own petard!

Jesus has used Isaiah's metaphor of the vineyard. The Temple where Jesus and his audience are speaking stands like a watchtower, looking over the fertile hill where the city of Jerusalem sits. A vineyard planted by God. The priests and elders have been entrusted to watch over this vineyard, to produce good fruit – Justice, Righteousness, Peace – for the kingdom of God. Instead they have produced wild grapes, they have driven out or killed the prophets, God's messengers, and they have horded wealth and power for their own justification.

Jesus' insult is cutting – the priests and elders are the wicked tenants, and in condemning the tenants in the story they have pronounced judgment on themselves.

The parable makes clear what the actions are of *unjust* stewards of God's gifts:

- A refusal to live in community: The tenants of this story imagine that the world inside their hedge is the only world they are responsible for. The stranger, the messenger, the visitor from the outside world is driven out.

- A refusal to change: To every new message, every new idea, every offer to use their gifts the tenants have the same response – "No."

- A determination to be utterly self-sufficient: The tenants kill the landowner's son, hoping to take his inheritance. Dependence on the outside world is mortifying; their rejection of relationship is fundamentally violent.

A determination to be utterly self-sufficient. A refusal to change. A refusal to live in community.

113 years ago, almost to the day, the great Bishop Phillips Brooks laid the cornerstone of a beautiful stone church here on Auburn Street. Horatio Parker, a parishioner and well-

known American composer whose father designed the original chapel for Messiah, composed a hymn for the occasion – "Auburndale," which we will sing at the offertory.

Half a century later, on November 15, 1943, that church building was razed to the ground by a devastating fire. In a parish living like the tenants of Jesus' parable this event would have been completely destructive. This fire made impossible any determination to be utterly self-sufficient, any refusal to change, any refusal to live in community.

Instead of being solely self-sufficient Messiah found itself receiving offers of help from throughout the neighborhood, across the country, even from Brazil and the South Pacific. We found ourselves receiving offers of help that crossed lines of race, religion and geography.

The fire made impossible a refusal to change: While there was an effort to stay as normal as possible – events like the annual Valentine Party went ahead – the life and rhythm of the parish was certainly different for those two years we held services at the Auburndale Club; and when we returned to Auburn and Commonwealth, we returned to a new building and a renewed congregation.

And the fire made impossible any refusal to live in community. Not only did we learn to be recipients of other peoples' generosity, but the fire taught Messiah a renewed empathy with the rest of the world. As though when the side walls of the parish collapsed in the flames, we saw the world again we saw the world in its need, in its brokenness, in its holiness – in a new way.

For some churches, I suppose a fire like this could have been an excuse to turn inwards. Instead, the monthly parish newsletter for December 1943 makes this note:

The first official act of the Vestry after the fire was to raise our Parish pledge to Diocese and General Church Funds some 40 per cent. We realize more fully than ever before the need in all the world.

We realize more fully than ever before the need in all the world. There it is, in linotype blue and white: the basic gospel message of the cross, the stewardship of hope that keeps churches thriving even in difficult times. No determination to retreat behind hedge and watchtower, no refusal of community or fear of change: The church has burned down, and we realize more fully than every before the need in all the world.

A gospel of abundance and generosity, a parish that does not meet for its own sake, but gathers to meet the need in all the world. A place that welcomes in children not for the future of the church but because we recognize that children have spiritual needs, and we want to meet those needs. A place that throws a neighborhood party with music and games, for free, no strings attached (well, banjo strings, I suppose) so that neighbors can feel welcome. A community that is praying all the time, filling in-boxes with prayer requests by e-mail bringing hope and healing and solace for both friends and strangers.

What a gift to be able to say: *We realize more fully than ever before the need in all the world.* Happy Anniversary.

© 2005, Devin McLachlan.