

# Sermon: Pentecost XVII: Proper 22

The Rev. Mike Wernick

October 5, 2014

Year A

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 80:7-15

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Like so many of Jesus' other parables... today's Gospel reveals its truth on more than one level... and it includes some of the themes contained in other parables... it helps us see the folly of greed and arrogance... helps us see the limitations of relying on ourselves and the limitlessness of relying on God...

It reminds me of the Parable of the Rich Fool... about the man who decides to build bigger barns to store his unprecedented yields... and God says: *your life will be demanded of you tonight...*

It reminds me of one of my favorite social justice verses from 1Corinthians... *the one who had much did not have too much... and the one who had little did not have too little...*

It reflects the sentiment of Matthew 6: don't worry about what you'll eat or drink or wear... isn't life more than food and the body more than clothing... and think about the lilies of the field... they don't go to the mall the way you do... but not even Solomon was clothed like one of them... so strive for God and God's righteousness... and you will have these things too...

In today's Parable of the Wicked Tenants... there's a cast of characters... it's clear that the landowner is God... the tenant farmers are the chief priests and Pharisees... and let's give them the benefit of the doubt... doing the best they can to care for Israel... the slaves were the prophets... who because of their truth telling and attempt at holding

Israel accountable... were beat up... stoned... or killed... and the son that the landowner sent was Jesus...

But what sticks out like a sore thumb... is this idea they have... to kill the son and inherit the vineyard... while the One who planted it is still alive... it's absurd... how could anyone think that if they killed me... my father would give them my inheritance... but it shows just how distorted our thinking can be when we're greedy... how we can justify almost anything to ourselves when we're not in relationship... how out of touch we can be... when we put ourselves above others...

The reading from Isaiah is a beautiful love song about relationship... full of emotion... sung by God... sung to us... God has dressed the vineyard as well as possible... cleared it of stones... dug out a wine vat... and planted it with us... we are the Lord's pleasant planting... and instead of getting grapes... he got *wild* grapes... he expected justice from us... but saw bloodshed... expected righteousness... but heard a cry... God is torn up... God says... I even built a Tower to watch over and protect you... how could I have done so much... given so much of myself... been so faithful... and gotten so little in return...

Towers *were* built to guard against thieves and fire... but in the context of this Gospel... I can't help but wonder if there's some implied reference to the Tower of Babel... whose builders wanted to make a name for themselves... to hold themselves up as self-sufficient... to maybe make themselves into gods... with no one to answer to...

The tenants didn't want to be just guardians of the vineyard... but its owners... they didn't want to be just humble servants... but the proud possessors of authority...and if the tenants thought the owner had gone away... far away... they may have also thought that any judgment they'd face would be so far off in the future... that they could escape it... that they could keep all the profits for themselves... and live out their time of

stewardship... before any judgment could descend on them... but their decision was shortsighted and intrinsically flawed...

And when Jesus asked the Pharisees what they thought the owner of the vineyard would do to the tenants... they said *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.*

Theologian Richard Spalding has written... It's not surprising that the chief priests and Pharisees project their human instincts onto a God who... as so much in their lives makes obvious... they do not know well... they may remember the voice of judgment that Israel heard at Sinai... when the mountain thundered and smoked... and it may be that in Matthew's worldview... aggrieved rulers responded to violation with violence... but it's no wonder that Jesus has all he can do... to temper their view...

Several of us just watched the movie [The Monuments Men](#)... it's based on the true story... of a group of mostly middle-aged men and a few women who interrupted careers as historians, architects, museum curators and professors to recover hundreds of thousands of art objects from over the last 1,000 years... including Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa and The Last Supper... Jan van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece... Michelangelo's Madonna of Bruges... Rembrandt's Self-portrait, 1645... stolen by Hitler's army and stored in secret Nazi warehouses... many of them deep in salt mines around Europe... recover them... protect them from combat damage... and return them as they were able... to their owners...

Towards the end of the film... Frank Stokes... the character played by George Clooney... said... *five million pieces of art... and Hitler wanted them all for himself...* sounds kind of like the tenants... doesn't it... you see nowhere... were more of them collected than at Altaussee... one of the salt mines in Austria... and Hitler intended these treasures for his *Fuhrermuseum* in Linz, Austria... a sprawling... so-big-it's-in-

bad-taste... museum complex that Hitler planned as a showcase for his plunder... *his* art... *his* plunder... *his* showcase...

And then Jesus reminded the Pharisees about the rejected stone... becoming the cornerstone... the rejected style of functioning... becoming the preferred style of functioning... and how... when the only unhealthy... Empire-way you know how to behave... is taken away from you... you'll be broken into pieces... how when your dysfunctional behavior is challenged and you just don't know how else to behave... can't imagine that there's any other way to behave... you'll be crushed... because in their arrogance... they have no other point of reference...

The vineyard owner may have... as the text says... gone away to another country... the original Greek word just means... *to go on a journey*... but he's not too distant... God will maintain at least sufficient distance... to enable us to determine our own fruitfulness... or to make our own mistakes... God is not an absentee landlord... but wants us to know... that mature faith means practicing sound values and sound devotion on our own... even when God *seems* distant...

So what is the harvest... what is the fruit... so much of what we see around us is manufactured... virtually everything that advertisers promote are things that can be seen or touched... it's so easy to think that the fruits are tangible things... but maybe the fruit of the vineyard isn't fruit... maybe it's not grapes... maybe the fruit of the vineyard isn't even what we do... maybe it's who we trust... maybe the fruit of the vineyard is an acceptance of John's message... about who Jesus is...

A more modern theological understanding of judgment was expressed so well... when author Frederick Buechner said... *the one who judges us most finally... will be the one who loves us most fully*... in the end... we're all tenants... we must let go of any sense of ownership for what we have to use... and account for how we used it...

So do we trust the vineyard owner... with our lives... with our excesses and our lacks... with our certainties and our insecurities... with our hubris and our humility... with who we are and who we're not... do we trust the vineyard owner enough... so that as author Brennan Manning wondered... there'll be only one... or two questions... when we get to heaven... *did you believe that I loved you... and if you did... did you live your life accordingly...*

Something to think about...

Mike+