

Isaiah 5:1-7 ~ Matthew 21:33-46  
Glimpses of Heaven on Earth: Yielding Fruit (4<sup>th</sup> of 6)  
19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost ~ October 8, 2023  
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*Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson*

Today we continue my six-sermon series, "Glimpses of Heaven on Earth" with another parable by Jesus that takes place in a vineyard. Two weeks ago, Jesus told his disciples his parable about the laborers in the vineyard just before they were about to enter Jerusalem for the last time. The setting of today's vineyard parable has shifted dramatically. It is Monday of Holy Week, and Jesus is in the Temple, addressing the chief priests and pharisees. We jump into this scene with Jesus on a roll. He takes a breath and begins his second of three parables, rapid fire. Let us have a listen to "Round two."

*Sermon*

"*What more* was there for me to do?" We hear that question in so many words both in our Isaiah text, and in Jesus' parable. Do you ever feel like you've tried just about everything you can think of, and nothing, no matter how hard you try, seems to be working? Trying harder does not help. In fact, the problem just keeps getting worse. There is kind of a Brubaker family (my family of origin) joke that has to do with this very phenomenon called "*trying too hard*." My husband Bob finds it extremely ironic. On the one hand I grew up hearing the expression (and seeing it played out over and over again): "Do it the hard way Brubaker." If there were three ways to get something accomplished, my family would always somehow choose the hardest way. On the other hand, the idea that someone was "trying too hard" was a favorite family put down. "Trying too hard" was a criticism, a trap to avoid, that when I was growing up, I aka, "Little Laur," would try my very best, not to fall into. And yet, being of the "Do it the hard way Brubaker" stock, found it pretty hard to avoid.

Did you notice how hard God was trying to make God's garden yield good grapes in Isaiah 5? In verse 4 we hear these heart rending questions, "What more was there for me to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?" Talking about trying hard. And then in Jesus' parable the Landowner faces a similar dilemma trying to collect his yield of produce from the vineyard. This parable is found also in Mark and Luke. In our Matthew telling the question is implied, but in Luke's version (20:13) the Landowner asks outright, "What should I do?" From where we are situated we know that the Isaiah prophecy led to exile for God's beloved people. And that Jesus' parable, led to the cross four days later. Both of these scriptures, this prophecy, and this parable, are hard to listen to because they are heavy with judgment. High expectations turned to blood and death. Yet neither the Exile in Babylon nor Jesus' death on the cross are the end of the story. There *was* more that God could do and would do.

At first exposure these stories feel harsh. Warning signs are flashing. And you may ask "Where *is* the Good News here? I came today for some hope and inspiration. Oh well." Stay with me and I hope this sermon might yield just that! First, I invite you to note that the Isaiah text is a

love-song: "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard." (Isaiah 5:1a) In the Matthew text, Jesus' parable that is known as "The Parable of the Wicked Tenants" would actually be better named, "The Parable of the Landowner and His Son." Here is why: The poignant turn in this story is the Landowner's decision to choose a most unexpected, vulnerable response to the escalating violence by the tenants against his slaves.

The "keep trying harder" approach, the expected meet-violence-with-greater-violence is not what the Landowner chooses. Round one: he sends three slaves to collect his produce and has them beaten, killed and stoned, boom, boom, boom. Round two: he sends a bigger battalion and all of them were also killed. So round three, you would expect something even bigger, some at the "shock and awe" level. And instead, he sends his beloved son (Luke's telling actually uses the word beloved) unarmed, all by himself. Shock and awe on a different scale. The Landowner chooses to step out of the cycle of violence, to de-escalate, by offering his most beloved son. And then the tenants proceeded to do their worst on him, too.

This is Monday of Holy Week, the day after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, Monday of the week that would end with Jesus being crucified on that Friday. This context is critically important: both the place, the timing, and the audience. Rabbi, Prophet Jesus, is responding to the chief priests and elders' question about his authority. "By what authority are you doing these things?" (21:23). Things like causing a ruckus in the Temple, disrupting business as usual, entering Jerusalem in a counter procession on a donkey. But in the larger gospel arc of Matthew: "these things" encompass really all of Jesus' teaching, centered on and spiraling out from the Beatitudes. "You have heard it said, but I say to you." This parable is another one of those constructions. Jesus artfully builds his parable of Judgment on the foundation of the song he knew, that they all knew, by heart, "The Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard." But then Jesus takes the familiar and turns it: in his parable there is no problem with the grapes. The problem is with the caretakers of the vineyard.

And like the story they also knew from their shared tradition, where Nathan tells "a story" to King David that leads him to see his own transgression with Bathsheba, the "You are the man!" moment; Jesus' parable led them to realize the point of his story. This parable was a judgment on them. And all the ways they were "trying too hard" to keep the status quo. Trying too hard to follow the letter of the law, and not seeing that "all these things" Jesus was doing, were actually the fulfillment of their shared tradition. "These things" were at the center of the Torah: Loving God and loving neighbor.

I need to *unteach* you something about this parable today. It has to do with the way Christians have used this parable as an allegory to say the Kingdom of Heaven was taken away from the Jews because they rejected Jesus as the Messiah. This is a misinterpretation that has had literally deadly consequences. This very scripture has been the source of all kinds of anti-Semitic rhetoric and action over the last two thousand years. It is why Jews were wrongfully labeled Christ-killers. It caused even great Christian thinkers like Augustine and Martin Luther to make outrageously anti-Semitic statements that were later used by Hitler as the theological

foundation for their actions and even the Holocaust. I hope to help us see today why this is a perversion of Jesus' original intent and of Matthew's as well.

First, we must begin with the context: Jesus, who was a Jew, was addressing his own "in house" Jewish leaders. He was trying to show his own people how they were failing to measure up to their original calling and mission from Genesis 12, where God called Abraham to be a blessing, so that through Abraham *all the families of the earth* shall be blessed. The way Jesus kept reaching out especially to Gentiles, to people who were outside the camp of "the chosen." Tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans. Yes, they were Jesus' people and God's people too. Jesus' way of radical inclusion and hospitality was at the heart of their Jewish tradition and their call. Jesus was calling them to account. An "in house" dressing down, so to speak.

Second, Jesus' teaching always, always points back to us. We need to listen for how Jesus is calling **us** to account. The question here is *our* responsibility to yield fruit. Where are we refusing to yield to God's way in our own lives and in the structural evil of which we are a part? Such as structural racism, systemic poverty, the destruction of our ecosystem. We are the tenants of God's vineyard where radical hospitality, and daring vulnerability bring unity, healing, and restoration. God's justice is the expected yield. I hear in both texts, God is calling us to ask: Where is there bleeding, instead of justice, in our immediate community and in our world. And who is crying for the lack of righteousness, or right relationship with God, with others, with all creation? We are accountable. And we can do better. Not by doing the same things, and just trying harder. The vineyard awaits.

Christ showed us a different way. A better way. A still, more excellent. With a love that is tougher than nails. *The yield comes from yielding.* Our yielding to God's way. Jesus way. Christ is calling us to the work of God's unifying love. I will close with what I will call a yielding prayer, titled, "Touch Me," written by Ted Loder. Let God into your heart, as you hear this prayer, ayielding to where God is calling you, this day.

*Come, Lord Jesus,  
touch me  
    with love, live-giving light,  
to quiet my anger a little,  
    and gentle my desperation,  
to soften my fears some  
    and soothe the knots of my cynicism,  
to wipe away the tears from my eyes  
    and ease the pains in my body and soul,  
to reconcile me to myself  
    and then to the people around me,  
    and then nation to nation,  
that none shall learn war any more,  
    but turn to feed the hungry,  
    house the homeless*

*and care compassionately for the least of our siblings.*

*Reshape me in your wholeness  
to be a healing person, Lord.*

*Come, Lord Jesus,*

*expand me*

*by your power life-generating as the sea,*

*to accept*

*and use my power,*

*to do something I believe in*

*and be something more of who I mean to be*

*and can be,*

*to inspire me to dream and move,*

*sweat and sing,*

*fail and laugh,*

*cuss and create,*

*to link my passion with courage,*

*my hope with discipline,*

*my love with persistence,*

*to enable me to learn from difficulties,*

*grow in adversities,*

*gain wisdom from defeats, perspective from disappointment, gracefulness from crises,*

*and find joy*

*in simply living it all fully.*

*Release me through your power to be a powerful person, Lord.*

*Come, Lord Jesus,*

*startle me with your presence, life-sustaining as air,*

*to open my heart to praise you*

*to open my mind to attend you,*

*to open my spirit to worship you,*

*to open me to live my life*

*as authentically and boldly as you lived yours.*

*Come, Lord Jesus*

*be with me in my longing;*

*come, stay with me in my needing;*

*come, go with me in my doing;*

*come, struggle with me in my searching;*

*come, rejoice with me in my loving.<sup>i</sup>*

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<sup>i</sup> "Touch Me," Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, (San Diego, CA: Lura Media, 1984), 88-89.