

Just like last week, Jesus is telling a story, a story squarely pointing an accusing finger at the religious leaders of the day. "You're not doing what God wants you to be doing," Jesus says.

Now remember, he tells the story the morning after he parades into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, huge crowds singing to him as their emperor and Messiah. Then he waltzes into the temple, and knocks over the tables of the money-changers, and shouts at these corrupt swindlers to get out while the crowd is still singing hosannas to him as their king. Just picture the red-faced religious leaders fuming, fearful Jesus' large swarming mass of supporters could launch a revolt, sandwiching them between their Roman overlords on one side and the Jesus throng on the other.

So with the furious group of religious leaders gathered around, asking him, "Who do you think you are – walking into our temple and acting like this?" Jesus starts upon a couple of vineyard stories to drive home his point.

Sometimes Jesus' stories can leave us wondering if we really understand what he is trying to say. Well, there's no missing the point of this one. This story is, like last week's, about a vineyard and the Lord who owns it. Because they know their scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, the people listening to Jesus know immediately that the vineyard represents Israel, and they know the owner is God.

The evil tenants are the religious elite, the leaders, the angry group standing right in front of Jesus with their arms crossed and steam coming out of their ears.

The unfortunate servants? Well, they are the great Prophets of Israel's history, sent by the Lord to collect his fruit, but who are beaten and killed by the evil tenants instead.

And you don't need me to tell you for whom the vineyard owner's son is a stand in, the son who is sent and killed, too. That's Jesus himself.

The religious leaders get it – they understand they're the villains in Jesus' story. They would love to arrest him right then and there, but know better than to try that. The adoring crowds gathered around Jesus will have their heads if they lay a finger on their Messiah, their liberator.

So, the religious leaders go away feeling even more furious. Jesus is undermining their authority. In front of all those people, Jesus' stories are putting them in a really bad light. As he arrives at the end of his story, Jesus looks them in the eye and tells them the kingdom of God will be taken away from them and given to a people producing the fruit of the kingdom.

The story may sound safe enough for us from a distance of 2000 years. But here we are, proclaiming this story in our midst today. So it's not just a 2000-year old tale about corrupt and misguided religious leaders appeasing the Roman Empire instead of bearing the fruit of the Kingdom. It is for us too, in the midst of other claims upon our allegiance, because we are a people who have been given stewardship of the vineyard, charged with cultivating the fruit of the kingdom of God.

"Bearing fruit" is another way of saying "Hearers of the word must also be doers of the Word." We must do more than listen to Jesus' teachings. No fruit is produced apart from doing the word we hear. No fruit is produced apart from embodying the word we hear.

The Gospel of Matthew has been issuing this message over and over again all year – when John saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized he said to them, "You must do those things that will show you have turned from your sins...every tree that does not bear good fruit will be thrown into the fire."

Fast forward a few years and we have Jesus saying to the religious leaders, "John warned you – he told you that you had to bear good fruit, but you missed your chance. So now the vineyard is being entrusted to others."

Fast forward another few years – well, about 2000 more to be precise – and we realize Matthew has included this story in his Gospel to say to us, “You are tenants...how’s the fruit production going?”

Being a tenant of a place means that you are living there. We are tenants of God's vineyard – the world God loves – right now. Producing fruit of the Kingdom means together we show signs of that Kingdom so people here and now can have a foretaste of the world God is summoning into its full realization throughout all creation. God’s world is a world where the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers, the generous, the compassionate, those who work for justice, those who yearn for comfort in their mourning – all of these – find themselves blessed, and those who are overlooked or thought to be of little value turn out to be first class citizens.

The fruits natural to such a world as that are what we call forth when we offer intercession and thanksgiving. The fruits natural to such a world are what we enact ritually when we break the bread and share the fruit of the vine at the Lord’s Table. And this fruit also is produced when we are sent out from this place to embody the blessing we’ve called forth for ourselves, for our world, for all creation.

A woman tells of a time she was walking along the beach on a cloudy day. She was lost in thought, savouring the solitude. Her contemplation was interrupted by the sound of man, just up the beach from where she stood, barely visible through the mist. With his arms wide, he shouted, “Come, blessings!” He turned toward the water, then away from the woman, again shouting, “Come, blessings, come!”

The woman stopped in her tracks, taking in the scene. Her pensive mood deepening, she considered the pure, direct spiritual appeal she was witnessing. Here was a man, she thought, who had made his way to the quiet presence of nature to shout into the wind and call forth the blessings he yearned for, perhaps for himself, perhaps for others. She couldn’t say.

She started walking again. She wanted to speak to the man. She wanted to thank him for the much-needed inspiration she received while witnessing his spiritual practice.

As she walked, the wind continued to carry his voice. “Come, blessings, come!” She started to whisper the simple, powerful words along with him, feeling increasingly buoyed and set free each time she did. Then the man stopped shouting as suddenly as when she first heard him, and she saw a big, floppy-eared dog emerging from the mist, bounding joyfully toward the man.

The woman was close enough to the man to hear him as he tousled the dog’s fur. “Blessings! There you are!” he said. “I thought I’d lost you!”

At first the woman felt foolish, having confused a dog named Blessings for a profound moment of communion with the divine. But, as she walked, she found herself considering the possibility that the inspiration, the message she had received was genuine, after all.

Yes, she decided. The message to call forth blessings clearly and plainly, in word and posture – the message to call forth the goodness, hope, peace, reconciliation for which she yearned, for which the world must surely yearn, was real. It’s real even if its bearer is an unlikely one, like a messenger with four legs and a tail.

“Perhaps,” she thought, “it was not a coincidence that the man had named his dog Blessings. And perhaps the dog had not been lost at all.”

The fruit of the Kingdom is produced, at least in part, when we do the work of calling it forth from the Spirit – calling it forth through word and through deed into the world.

Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done.

*Story from*

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