

Year A Proper 27 Bearing Fruit Together Matthew 21:33-46 (2023)

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," he says.

A quick reminder...he tells these stories 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 that 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 lays before them a couple of vineyard stories to drive home his message.

Sometimes Jesus' stories can leave us wondering if we really understand what he is trying to say. Well, there is no missing the point of this one. This story, like last week's, is about a vineyard and the Lord who owns it. Because they know their scriptures, 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 are 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, abusing their power and authority, 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, we are reminded that we gave our allegiance to God – we made promises we are expected to keep. We, too, 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. We must not content ourselves with having life in God's kingdom. We must live our lives according to the ways of God in God's kingdom.

The Gospel of Matthew has been issuing this message over and over again – when John the Baptist 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 reinforcing John's warning to the religious leaders, "John warned you – he told you that you had to bear good fruit,

but you are throwing away 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, his kingdom – 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 – on earth as in heaven. 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...adored by God, 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 this are what we call forth together each week when we offer intercession and thanksgiving. The fruits natural to such a world are what we enact ritually each week 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 be the blessing we've called forth for ourselves, for our world, for all creation, to call forth this fruit in others.

This talk of calling forth the fruits of the Spirit – for ourselves and for the world – may sound different from what I usually say but it is not. It is a different way of speaking of God's purpose: total reconciliation of all creation – with God, people, and planet, transformation from brokenness into wholeness, healing, mending, fixing...they are all different ways of describing God's ultimate purpose and they are *all* action words.

It is absolutely not enough that we say we have faith and tend to our own spiritual growth and well-being. We are not the vineyard. We are the tenants in the vineyard and God has tasked us with tending to the vineyard, ensuring its

spiritual growth and well-being, tasked with bringing forth in the vineyard the fruits of the Spirit.

The fruits of the Spirit are the visible outcomes of living life according to God's ways. They are what we and others see as we transform, heal, mend, fix. Peter and Paul both write lists of the fruits of the Spirit we will bear and the one thing both lists include is love. All other good things come from love. Compassion, kindness, giving, forgiving – all start with love. Love builds relationships and that is what God desires for the tenants and for the vineyard – complete reconciliation.

To grow the fruits of the Spirit, we must, as Paul tells us, constantly strain forward to what lies ahead – the complete fullness of God's kingdom. He explains that we are to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than ourselves. We are to look not to our own interests, Paul says, but to the interests of others. Most importantly he writes, let the same mind be in you as one body that was in Christ Jesus: willing to give up what we have in order to serve the needs of others, lifting up those who are more vulnerable. This is the power of the cross and it is powerful on an individual level. But it is infinitely more powerful when lived together on a societal level.

As tenants, we are to target what does not belong in the vineyard, those things that are not supposed to be growing in God's kingdom, and we are to weed them out by growing what *is* supposed to be there...the fruits of the Spirit. We do this, not because we are afraid of the landowner coming back to collect what is his, but rather, we do this because we eagerly long for the "prize" as Paul calls it (Phil.3:14) – we desire the fullness of God's kingdom and it will be a lot of hard work, with God, to achieve it. Judgement is in this story Jesus tells today. The landowner is coming back to collect his produce – he is coming back to incorporate, into the perfection of the kingdom, all of the good we accomplish. Some people are frightened at the thought of God's judgment because mainstream thinking tells us to be frightened, it tells us God punishes. But Scripture – and Jesus – tells us that God, the landowner, is a God who forgives the astronomical debt of a servant; God hires all the men in the marketplace so that

everyone has enough to feed their families; God invites all of the marginalized into his wedding banquet that was snubbed by the ones who think they're doing just fine without God. Yes, there is judgment but it is the judgment of a loving, forgiving God, the God who welcomes the first son who first says no to the father but then changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard. We are allowed to mess up, realize we are wrong, and change our ways to God's ways, God keeps sending messengers into his vineyard. Judgment is not the point of this story. Doing the work of God, producing the fruit of the kingdom – that is the point of this story.

In her book called *Radical Gratitude*, Mary Jo Leddy has a chapter named, "Jesus and the point of his being." In it, she writes, "Jesus left us with [the deep connection between gratitude for being born of God and trust in the future], a vision worthy enough to summon every aspect of our being and the whole of our lives. Yet this vision is not a blueprint. It is not a detailed plan of what we are to do and how we are to do it. It has been left to us to fill in the blanks, as it were. The great dream of God for the world is not a concrete plan but it is compelling. It gives us a sense of how the story of the world and of how our own story will end. It will end as it began – in goodness. It makes all the difference in the world to believe that the dream of God for the world is going to happen. I learned this from a very holy older woman, Sister of Mercy Kieran Flynn. She lay dying of cancer and, with the help of morphine, she lay unconscious in the hospital. She, however, was saying prayers: You are the way, You are the truth, You are the life, bless the poor, have mercy. The prayers could not have come from a level of consciousness but had to have come from some deeper level of the unconscious and the imagination. At the deepest level of her being, she had been shaped by the word of God. She was breathing from God and for God and with God. She had become a prayer. Then one afternoon, as three of us were sitting by her bed, it was as if she awoke but she could not have been conscious. In a very clear voice she said: 'I had a dream. I dreamt that all the men and women were all seated around a round table, all equal, all free. It will take a thousand years but it doesn't really matter, because it's going to happen.' And then she slipped back into wherever she had come from. I heard this as the dream of God or what has

traditionally been called the vision of the reign of God or the kingdom of God. It is a dream of justice, peace, and love. Kieran's dream was part of God's great dream for the world. We, each and every one of us, are part of this great dream. Our smaller dreams and hopes are part of God's point for the world. It is sometimes difficult to hear that 'it will take a thousand years,' but it makes all the difference in the world whether we believe in the power of this dream to prevail. It is this dream that has the power to sustain us in struggle and the power to endure through the collapse of our particular hopes." Leddy ends the chapter with this poem,

"You are the Still Purpose. You come down as snowflakes onto the tops of the mountains. You flow through the world as streams and then as mighty rivers rolling toward the great ocean of Your Love. You sow seeds of Your purpose throughout the world in all nations and peoples and gather them up again in Your due season. You Still Purpose We begin in Your name and end in Your name" (pp.139-141).

Beginning and ending, let us together bear fruit.