

Vineyard and Table
Lead Pastor Cynthia Lapp
Worldwide Communion Sunday
October 5, 2008

Psalm 19
Isaiah 5:1-7
Matthew 21: 33-46

Matthew is really working these parables. We have been following the lectionary the past few weeks and we keep bumping up against these very strange and difficult vineyard parables. We had the story of the vineyard workers who all get paid the same amount no matter how long a shift they work. The lesson: "The first shall be last and last shall be first." Last week we had the story of the two brothers who are told to go work in the vineyard. One says he will but doesn't, one says he won't but does. The moral of the story: "The tax collectors and prostitutes get into the kingdom before the faithful." The lessons seem so non-sequiter; you probably had to be there.

Today, another vineyard — this time complete with fence, watchtower and winepress. What is it with all the vineyards? We know Jesus liked good wine. That was his first miracle according to John's gospel, turning water into wine at the wedding. But there is something more.

The vineyard is found throughout the Hebrew scriptures as the symbol for Israel. We heard it in the song and story of Isaiah 5 this morning. It is spelled out explicitly.

*⁷For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel*

Jesus studied the scriptures. As clever as he was, he is not inventing these images we see in the gospels. He is following in the tradition, teaching what the children of Israel, the followers of Moses, already know.

Isaiah begins gently, with the Beloved preparing a vineyard. We are almost lulled into thinking it is a sensuous song like in Song of Solomon, with vineyards and fig trees, turtle doves and love. But Isaiah moves quickly from love to anger.

Jesus begins just as Isaiah except without the love. He introduces the story of the vineyard owner who prepares the vineyard. Like in Isaiah there is a protective hedge or fence, a watchtower and a winepress. Then Jesus departs from Isaiah. Where Isaiah has wild grapes instead of domesticated ones, Jesus has wild tenant farmers.

In the gospel, the tenant farmers are to tend and harvest the vineyard while the owner is gone. But at harvest time when the owner sends servants to collect the portion to which the owner is entitled, the tenants violently oppose the servants. It is not only opposition that awaits the succession of servants sent by the owner, it is death. In one last attempt to communicate with the tenant farmers the owner sends the son, the heir to the vineyard thinking that surely the tenants will respect him, give him the fruit that is due the owner. But seeing the heir they conspire to kill him as well, thinking that finally the whole operation will be theirs and they will be the new inheritors.

Jesus asks his listeners, "What do you think will become of these tenants?" The listeners respond, "They will come to a wretched end and new tenants will be found."

Just as Jesus builds on Isaiah's vineyard image, so do the gospel writers. Mark's version in chapter 12 ends simply with the saying about the cornerstone and the listeners unsure of what to do with Jesus since he is so popular with the crowd.

But Matthew, taking a page from how Jesus adapts a story for a particular audience, is tougher on the tenant farmers. Matthew makes it clear whom he is talking about. It is not just that the farmers will come to a wretched end. It is not only that the vineyard will be taken away. Matthew spells it out for these listeners: "The **kingdom** will be taken away from you — and given to people who **will** produce fruit."

The chief priests and Pharisees listening realize this harsh message is for them. They are scandalized that Jesus would speak this way to them, that he would indict them. They would like to see him arrested right then and there (and

indeed in Matthew and Mark this incident does occur early in the last week of Jesus' life). But fearing the response of the crowd the religious leaders leave.

For Matthew this is another way of saying, once again, that the tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom first, the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Those who see themselves as authentically religious have missed the message. The farmers who fancy themselves the faithful favorites of the vineyard owner, seeking to keep all the fruit for themselves have somehow forgotten that they are stewards and not owners; they are accountable, not the ones doing the counting.

It has come to this — the gentiles understand and receive the message and the guardians of the tradition, the Pharisees and temple keepers, do not. Though messengers and prophets have been sent, they have been beaten up and killed. And now, here in their midst, the owner's own son and he too is destined for death.

Jesus mixes metaphors to give the moral of the parable from Psalm 118: *The stone that was rejected by the builders has now become the cornerstone.*

Mixed metaphor or not, the Pharisees get this message. They know Jesus is talking about them; if they don't trip over this stone, they will be crushed by it.

You may be tired of me saying so but I think we need to keep reminding ourselves: this is another time that we must be careful not to blame the Jews as a people for rejecting Jesus or for the death of Jesus. The message Jesus is conveying here is not only about Jewish leaders. This is the story of any religious leader that gets so possessive of the truth that she thinks she alone knows and owns the truth. This is about any pious person that is overprotective of the fruit and does not share it with others or even with the one who planted the vineyard.

When the experts think that they have all the answers, when those in power go to desperate ends — grasping for ever more power to shore up their position — we know we are seeing Jesus' parable played out again.

But this metaphor may seem pretty distant for those of us with only small patches of dirt to grow our herbs. Without farms or vineyards, where do we plug into this story? What we have in the community of faith is the table to which

Jesus invites us. The fruit of the vineyard has been pressed into juice that we share.

So how is it going, being stewards of the table? Traditionally Mennonites have guarded the table quite closely, sharing it only with those who already know the Jesus story and who understand and live it just as we do. In some Mennonite communities the path to the table was (and maybe still is) fraught with fearful soul searching and even confession to the local bishop. We have protected the table in an effort to protect ourselves from those who might be unclean or unfit. We have even tried to protect ourselves from God. In an attempt to guard against eating and drinking damnation upon ourselves, we have lost sight of the host of the table.

When we closed the community and closed the table maintaining, "You must be Mennonite to eat with us," we were replaying the parable. When we protect the table and deny who owns it, when we keep all the fruit of our labor for ourselves, we are replaying the parable.

When we share the table with those who are hungry, or thirsty or the stranger or sick or imprisoned as Matthew instructs in chapter 25 then we welcome Christ; we welcome the heir to the vineyard. The harvest is plentiful. We have stories to share of how the Spirit is alive and working in our lives as individuals and as a congregation here at Hyattsville Mennonite. Can we share this fruit?

How do we approach the table today, knowing that people all over the world join us in this meal? We, who have more than enough, are eating across the global table from people who are hungry, thirsty and sick. We eat with our sisters and brothers in Sincelejo, Colombia. We eat with the Brethren in Christ churches undergoing persecution in Zimbabwe; we eat with Mennonites (who do not always get along) in the Democratic Republic of Congo. And we drink with Methodists, Anglicans, Catholics and Pentecostals. Today we share the meal not only with those whom we agree but with all those who are eager (and maybe some who are a bit reluctant) to claim they follow the Jesus way.

As guests at the table, maybe even stewards of the table, the challenge is to share it and preserve it at the same time. We want to avoid the trap that the tenant farmers fell into: imagining that they could own the whole vineyard and keep the harvest for themselves. The vineyard and table are not ours to own. The vineyard and wine were in existence long before we came along. Our hope and faith is that they will continue long after we are gone. Even if we kill the messenger, the vineyard goes on. Even if the owner's heir is killed, the table is prepared. This is our story in the bible; this is our story today. The messengers of God are not always welcomed yet God continues working.

The fruit of the vine, the grain of the field. These are the gifts we receive from the vineyard owner, the gifts we bring to the table and share with all who follow the way of the son.

May God give us courage to participate in the harvest and generosity to share the fruit we are given.