

September 27, 2026—The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. James Wyatt

To Till and to Tend

“What do you think?” Jesus asks by way of introducing the parable of the two sons. This is the second of three parables right in a row in our lectionary that have to do with laborers in a vineyard. Last week, we heard the parable of the landowner who reframed what justice and fairness are by giving work to more workers in his vineyard. In between last week’s Gospel reading and this week’s, Jesus comes to Jerusalem and protests the monetary abuses in the Temple in the interest of what is just and fair. And I don’t think it’s an accident that Jesus tells this parable immediately after he starts having confrontations with chief priests and elders and other leaders of the people.

Because a vineyard or a vine is a well-established metaphor for the nation of God’s chosen people. Psalm 80 laments that the vine which God brought out of Egypt and lovingly planted in the holy land is being trampled and devoured and burned: “Turn now, O God of hosts,” the Psalmist prays, “look down from heaven; behold and tend this vine; preserve what your right hand has planted.” (Ps 80:14) The prophet Isaiah takes that image and runs with it, telling a parable of how God carefully planted a vineyard, clearing it of stones and planting it with choice vines. And God “expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes”—which is to say sour grapes, unfit for eating or making wine. Isaiah goes on to explain his parable: “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” (Isaiah 5:7)

I wonder, does that change the way you hear Jesus’ parable of the two sons? “What do you think?” A man with two sons had a vineyard, and the vineyard is the nation of God’s people. He goes to his sons and tells them to work in the vineyard—to carefully tend the vines, clear out the stones and weeds, build a watchtower and a wine vat—so the vineyard can bear fruit, the fruit of righteousness and justice. One son says he won’t go and do this work, but then he does. And the other son says he will do the work, but he does not. The chief priests and elders of the people, Jesus is suggesting, are like the second son. They said they would do this work—they said they’d tend the vine, they’d take care of God’s people and make sure everyone has what they need—and they have failed in that responsibility. They said they’d bring forth the fruit of justice and righteousness, but they produced only the sour grapes of bloodshed and outcry. They’re not just dishonest and hypocritical, they’re not just cowards who are afraid to admit the truth about John the Baptist for fear of the crowds. No, their refusal to tend the vineyard has caused real harm—oppression and poverty and hunger among the people God loves. And they enjoy the position of leadership, the respect of the people, and their own entitled authority, without being willing to shoulder any of the responsibilities of leadership or to recognize God’s ultimate authority.

Let me be super clear, here: Jesus is *not* saying that the whole Jewish people have failed to do God’s will. He’s saying that their *leaders*, in *that particular* time and place, had failed in their responsibility to feed the hungry and maintain justice—as so many leaders, in so many nations, have done before and since.

What’s interesting to me, reading the parable through this lens, is that it suggests the tax collectors and prostitutes are like the first son, the one who initially refused to work in the vineyard but later changed his mind and did the work. And that suggests not just that they repented of their sinful ways of sex work and extortion and collaborating with Rome, but that they responded to the call of John the Baptist by bringing forth good fruit—fruit of justice and righteousness, fruit of feeding the hungry and caring for the least of God’s people. I am reminded of the way I’ve seen some of our unhoused guests at Fresh Start taking care of each other. These people who are so often overlooked or looked down on are sometimes the ones who are doing good work in the vineyard—they’re tending the vines and bearing good fruit.

And friends, that's what we were made to do! I'm thinking about the creation story in the second chapter of Genesis, when God planted the garden of Eden and settled the Human there "to till it and tend it." We talk about that like it's a bit of mythic history, something that might or might not have happened a long, long time ago, but really, God is *always* planting gardens and vineyards and inviting us to till and tend them, to bring forth good fruit from the creation around us. That's who we are. Our creative God is not done creating, and we—caretakers of God's garden—are not done with that work either. And just like God made water well up from the earth to water the garden of Eden, so God made water well up from the rock to slake the thirst of the people of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness—and so God makes living water gush up from us to eternal life, as Jesus said to the Samaritan woman. (John 4:14) The God of all creation is still creating, and is making us and all things new.

And we share in that work of creation by tilling and tending the various gardens and vineyards we find ourselves inhabiting: We tend the garden of God's whole glorious creation, by being mindful of the resources we use and the ones we waste or destroy, by savoring and preserving the beauty of the world around us, and by reducing our dependence on fuels that are warming the planet. We tend the vineyard of our nation, by participating in our democratic process, making our voices heard through voting and through protest, and speaking up for the people who are getting ground down and squeezed out. We tend the vineyards of our own community by showing up for our neighbors, feeding and caring for those in need and building a place where all families can thrive. And we tend the gardens of our homes, our families, and our own souls, by listening to the movement of the Holy Spirit in and among us, and drinking deep of the living water. And always, always, the goal of tilling and tending these gardens, these tangled vineyards of twisting vines, is to bear good fruit, sweet grapes—to bring forth justice and righteousness, and to live out love, joy, and peace.

Jesus says that those of us who do the work, who don't just talk the talk but walk the walk, will "go into the kingdom of God ahead of" the leaders who are all talk, who care more about the position and prestige of leadership than they do about the responsibility of caring for their people. He doesn't say they're doomed, here, just that the others, the tax collectors and prostitutes, are going into the kingdom *first*. And I think that's because doing the work of bringing forth good fruit *is* going into the kingdom. When we help bring justice and righteousness and love and joy and peace and all those other sweet fruits into the world, we can taste what life is like in God's kin-dom. Working in God's vineyard is its own reward, "for it is God who is at work in you," as Paul says to the Philippians, "enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure." (Phil. 2:13)

May we continue, then, to till and tend the gardens and vineyards we find ourselves among, working to bring forth good fruit as we taste and savor the goodness of the kin-dom of God. Amen.