

October 4, 2026—The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. James Wyatt

Tending Creation

“Listen to another parable,” Jesus says to us this morning, introducing the third of three parables right in a row in our lectionary about laborers in a vineyard. Two weeks ago, Mirabella Maeve preached about the parable of the landowner who reframed what justice and fairness are by giving work to more workers in his vineyard. Then last week, we heard the parable of two sons sent to work in their father’s vineyard: one who said he would work to bring forth the good fruit of justice and righteousness but did not, and one who said he wouldn’t work but did anyway. And then today is another parable about the mismanagement of God’s vineyard. There’s a lot of similarity between last week’s parable and this week’s, and in fact they don’t just come back to back in the lectionary, they follow one after another in the Gospel of Matthew as well. And both of them come almost immediately after Jesus made a scene in the Temple and started having some heated conversations with the chief priests and other leaders of the people. And so we get these two parables in a row that talk about how these leaders have failed to be good stewards of the vineyard that is the nation of God’s chosen people.

I talked last week about Isaiah’s parable of how God carefully planted a vineyard, clearing it of stones and planting it with choice vines, and in places here it seems like Jesus is almost directly quoting Isaiah’s words, and particularly the Greek translation of Isaiah’s words: “He placed a wall around it and fortified it... he built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it,” (Is. 5:2 LXX) Isaiah says, just like the landowner in Jesus’ story. And again, Isaiah says “the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting.” (Is. 5:7) And the story Jesus tells is of the landowner—of God sending the prophets to collect the harvest of justice and righteousness from the tenants who were supposed to tend the vineyard, only to have the tenants, the leaders of the people, beat and kill and stone the prophets. And so finally, in desperation, God sends God’s own son, and the tenants kill him, thinking to take the vineyard for themselves.

Now, again, friends, the easy way to read this parable is a hurtful way, a way that has supported a great deal of harm inflicted upon our Jewish siblings. But Jesus here is not condemning his own Jewish people, again, he’s chastising the leaders in *that particular* time and place who failed to deliver to God the righteousness and justice that should have been the fruit of the vineyard they were tending.

But I also feel like Jesus is pointing to something deeper, here—not something about particular people, but something that’s twisted and broken and wrong in the hearts of *all* people. God placed us in this vineyard, this beautiful garden of creation, to till and to tend it. The garden’s not ours, right? The garden belongs to God. But we’ve decided that certain people own certain parts of it. We’ve parceled out creation to those who have enough money to buy a piece of it. And we’ve come to imagine that we’re not tenants, but landowners ourselves. In the words of poet Reynolds Price,

“Even our own feeble hands
ache to seize the crown you wear,
and work our private havoc through
the known and unknown lands of space.”

We are so desperate to cling to the little kingdoms we build for ourselves, with all their injustice and bloodshed and outcry, that we will do all kinds of violence to keep what we so foolishly believe is ours.

It is not ours, friends. It never was. “The earth is God’s, and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein,” as Psalm 24 says. And “The heavens declare your glory, O God, and the firmament shows your handiwork,” (Ps 19:1) as we sang this morning, if we would only remember to look and to listen.

On Wednesday morning this week, there was a big ol’ spider over in the chapel as we prayed Morning Prayer together. I don’t love spiders, honestly, but apparently she wanted to

pray Morning Prayer with us, so I kept a wary eye on her—I didn't want to lose track of her position—and she was gone on Thursday. Friday morning I noticed a lovely salamander in the dish of water we keep out front for Suzie and other dogs. I thought maybe it was dead, but it stirred when I started to pour the water out, so I left it there to continue giving its praise to God in whatever way a salamander does. And I didn't plan it this way, but the Season of Creation, which started this year right before my birthday, has corresponded with my sudden interest (I won't say obsession) with kayaking out on Liberty Bay, which has me paying more attention to the turn of the tides and the cycle of the moon and the movements of herons and the behavior of gulls and terns and crows and the delightful presence of harbor seals than ever before in my life. And I am becoming more and more aware of the days and the nights telling their tales and imparting their knowledge to each other: "Although they have no words or language, and their voices are not heard, their sound has gone out into all lands and their message to the ends of the world." (Ps 19:3-4) And I suspect that all of our furry and feathered and scaly friends here with us and at home this morning—some of whose voices are definitely heard!—have a great deal to teach us, too, about the God who created them and us and the world we share.

First and foremost, I suspect, being that we are meant to *share* it, not to own it, dominate it, or exploit it. But we are so used to domination and exploitation that it can be hard for us to imagine any other way of living in this world.

Nita made a really powerful observation in Bible Study on Tuesday night about the Ten Commandments we heard in our reading from Exodus: She pointed out that all these "you shall nots" are a description of life in the loving care of a God of abundance. Being liberated from slavery in Egypt, a life of scarcity and toil, the Israelites were set free—free from the want and need that led them to covet each other's things, free from the bitterness and anger that led them to violence and murder, free from backbreaking labor so they could keep the Sabbath holy. I'm tempted to read the commandments not so much as "don't do these things" but rather as "you won't do these things any more," not as imperative, but as a simple expression of future reality. As if God were saying, hush now, it's okay, you're free, and the time for all that nonsense is over.

Of course, the Israelites' encounter with God on Mt. Sinai did not bring an end to all that nonsense—murder and plunder and covetousness, all our old patterns of domination and exploitation are still with us. But the words God spoke to the people at Sinai gave them—and still give us—a way to imagine a different life. And Jesus came to give us that life.

Because when the landowner sent the beloved son to the wayward tenants of the vineyard, the garden of love and righteousness blossomed in his footsteps, the vineyard burst with good fruit, the earth joined the heavens in singing praise, and all creation rejoiced at his presence. The twisted and broken part of our all-too-human hearts "seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him," but did we think we could kill the author of life? Did we imagine we could destroy the Word of creation?

No, the Light of the World can't be extinguished—not by our feeble hands. The beloved Son is still with us here in the vineyard, still bringing forth new life and new growth, still working to heal and mend the parts of our hearts that are broken and twisted and wrong and turn us toward a new way of living—a way of abundance, a way of sharing, a way of peace and righteousness—if we would only remember to look and to listen.

So may we, like Paul, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ... press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:14) Amen.