

Another Tale from the Vineyard  
Matthew 21:33-46 and Isaiah 5:1-7  
World Communion Sunday  
Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

The temperature was in the low 70s, the sky was that brilliant October blue, the wind just swift enough to take note. Most people were anticipating a day in the park, walks and bike rides through town, or perfect weather for watching college football. But before any of those “first real Saturday of Autumn” activities, eight St. Charles Avenue friends met in Baton Rouge yesterday morning with about 40 representatives from other Louisiana congregations to talk about remnants of Baptist identity from the 20th century.

The one steady image that was returned to throughout the day was one we have referenced here in worship before. Phyllis Tickle has famously written of the great “rummage sales” of Christian tradition. About every 500 years we see a shift in how the church understands itself, how the church worships and welcomes, how the church lives out its sense of self. From roughly 1500-1600 it was the work of the Reformation, and we find ourselves now in another 500 year rummage.

The conversation yesterday focused largely on what happens when you start sorting through family treasures in the attic before preparing items for a yard sale. You find things you know will be tossed out, but first you think about their stories and laugh a while, get choked up remembering. You realize some of these items won't matter to anyone but you and will end up in the trash. You find things you'd forgotten all about and want to repurpose, and then you stumble upon family treasures you never quite knew the history of but suddenly want to learn more about. The conversation yesterday largely focused on the attic. What gets tossed out at the sale, what is preserved, what is rediscovered.

But the conversation stopped at the attic not at questioning the 500 year idea. If we're in the midst of a great shift in the history of the church, we aren't just talking about practices of worship and ways we organize ourselves. We're talking about a reformation or a schism or something that completely re-orders the way the church understands being church. Even in keeping with the rummage sale idea, it means things we have held and owned and valued are going to go away. There is a releasing of deeply held beliefs, deeply entrenched practices. There will be a line in the sand that some cross and others don't. Something will die when this shift is done.

That scares us a bit more. The thought of something we love and value getting tossed out, lost to time, no longer “ours” as it has been...that gets our attention.

The religious leaders in Matthew, Jesus’ colleagues in rabbinical study and teaching, are not comfortable with his description of one of these shifts in understanding. His message of love God, love others, love yourself is deemed overly simplistic. Where are the rules, Jesus? Love others to what point, Jesus? There was a shift in theological understanding happening. A line was being drawn in the sand. Or maybe a circle was being drawn wider. Or extra places at the table were being set. Whatever the image, not everyone was comfortable with the shift.

And before we caricature what little we know of 1st century Jewish leaders according to these four Gospels, broadly, and today’s text, specifically, let us listen with an ear for our contemporary 500 year rummage sale. Let us not go with the dangerous interpretation that *they* missed out and *we* benefited from Jesus’ teaching. Because we are now the comfortable and the guarded in this story. We are the ones who do not want Jesus telling us we misunderstood, we got something wrong, we need to let go of dividing lines and rules that keep people from discovering wholeness. We need to listen.

For the third week, we return to a vineyard parable. Each one is a bit different, so it’s an image to explore from multiple angles. According to each of these stories, we’re not just invited to BE on the vineyard. It’s not a resting place. We are called to work. In the first parable, the owner invites workers all day long to participate in the life of his vineyard, and he pays them all the same generous wage no matter when they arrived. He is being extravagant with his own resources, Jesus explains. How can the workers be envious of such generosity?

Last week we looked at parable two: not giving lip service to doing God’s work but actually getting out there and doing it. Two sons are asked to work, one says “yes” while the other says “no,” but it is the one who refuses who actually ends up doing the work while the one who agrees to work does nothing.

And today we sit with the darkest of them all. The landowner has leased the property to a group of farmers, and one term of the lease is that the landowner gets a portion of every harvest. However, the group maintaining the land decides to act like it’s all theirs and refuses to honor the terms of their agreement. Not only do they refuse, but when the landowner’s representatives show up at the field, they are attacked and even murdered. Their lives are deemed inconsequential when compared to the loss in sharing the harvest from the land.

Jesus tells this story and asks his listeners for the final scene. How do you think this story will play out? They answer, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

The greed and selfish gain of the tenants, their acts of fear and self-preservation will lead to their destruction. Those willing to work the vineyard and share the harvest with the one who owns the land will replace these cowards.

Will we be partners in God’s work or cowards who fight and reject God’s servants? When we forget who we are, we are in danger. First, we must remember the vineyard belongs to God. We’re workers, we’re partners, we’re invited into God’s space and time and cosmic activity, but it all belongs to God. The tenants don’t understand their relationship to the land or their relationship to the landowner.

Second, there’s an abundant harvest in God’s vineyard, and God expects to receive part of that harvest. What does that mean? Is it our money? Is it our time? Is it the way we welcome or reject the representatives God sends to us? Yes, it’s all of it. The church word for this is stewardship. This is a comprehensive understanding that our lives and resources are to be shared. We are to be as generous in welcoming as we are in giving. We are to be generous because God is generous. We are to reflect God’s nature.

Third, the landowner takes great risks trying to communicate with the landowners, and he expects them to be more receptive than seems reasonable. These parables seem to highlight that quality of God with each new telling—God’s actions do not seem reasonable. If a landowner sends his workers to collect what belongs to him, and those workers are attacked or murdered, the instinct is prosecution and punishment and not a second chance. But the landowner sends more representatives. The landowner sends his own child to represent the urgency and importance of honoring the contract. The owner of the vineyard believes the ones working the land are capable of changing their behavior and doing the thing they originally agreed to do. Their actions of faith can match their words of confession. He believes this about them even when they show no good reason to believe it.

Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary writes, “The Kingdom of God does not work like the reign of the marketplace. What you do, who you are, is not for the sake of yourself, but for the sake of something beyond yourself. In the end, tending to the presence and potential of the Kingdom of God is not just about tending the vineyard, but tending

something that is beyond your control. We have no idea what the yield will be. And the unsettling question of it all is what will you do with it?"<sup>1</sup>

We're in a season of renewal not just as a congregation but as people of faith in this time and age. We must listen carefully to these vineyard parables because they are calling us to connect the words of faith with the actions of our lives in ways we have failed to comprehend. Are we partners with God or are we selfish tenants? Do we stay in the attic remembering old stories and fondly considering the family legacy, or do we figure out what's on the other side of this rummage sale? What is being re-formed here? It starts with us. You and I need to be re-formed by God's values and God's ways, and our lives need to reflect God's mysterious kingdom.

What fruit are we producing and harvesting?

What do we fear sharing with God?

Who are we rejecting for our own self-preservation?

What damage are we inflicting on those valued by the vineyard owner but perceived as a threat by us?

Are Jesus' listening colleagues right in today's text? Is God willing to replace the workers with ones who get it? If we aren't willing to be God's partners in the fullest sense, will God find a way to work and move somewhere else without us?

It's a lot to process, and these aren't easy questions. But we have to ask them. We have to hold them. We can't keep coming back to this table with unexamined lives. We can't keep eating of this bread and drinking of this cup without asking ourselves these questions.

Are we honoring God here? Are we honoring God with our lives? Are we moving out of fear or out of a bold sense of God's guidance? Are we ensuring there is room at this table for all people? Are we working for the good of God's kingdom or actively fighting and blocking God's efforts to hold us to God's standards?

We are tenant farmers on borrowed land. We are expected to care for the fields, keep the weeds at bay, and return the first fruits of each harvest to the landowner. Put differently, all that we see and all that we have is a gift. We are to live as though what we are holding is borrowed, fragile, and sacred. Preacher, writer, and rabble rouser Roger Lovette offers this reflection to consider:<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3348>

<sup>2</sup> Roger Lovette, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3252>

“God left us with this vineyard to tend and to make productive. When God gave it to us the fields were lush and beautiful. What kind of tenants have we been?”

“Such a strange story seems a long way from the silver trays and broken bread [of our communion table]. Yet God has left this parable on the doorsteps of the church and it won’t go away.”

“The world is asking these questions [of our gathering]. Can we come? And how much will this supper cost? The way we answer these questions will determine the kind of tenants we are. We still have much work to do. We keep reminding one another that the table is not ours. We just work here. The vineyard belongs to God.”