

18th Sunday After Pentecost Reflection

Pr. Nicole Hanson-Lynn October 3-4, 2020

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalms 80:7-15

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the giver and sustainer of our faith, the Holy Spirit.

This week is the first week that we are opening our buildings to in person worship since we closed our buildings back in March. When I sat down to look at our texts for the week, I had our current situation on my mind. The bittersweet of returning to an in person worship that looks different, sounds different, feels different, and has some of the people we have longed to see, but in which others are still joining us from home.

And I have to admit that I struggled with the texts this week. They just do not fit the image that I had for what this sermon needed to address. I had hoped and wondered about preaching joy and sorrows together. And now as we hear that the situation is becoming even more dangerous in the Upper Peninsula, and President Trump was diagnosed with COVID19... I was really looking for some good news in today's readings.

And what we have is more in the vineyard and more conviction. This is the third week of vineyard parables from Jesus, and while it will be the final week of vineyard parables for this church year, we are definitely in a troubling part of the lectionary. We are in the beginning of Holy Week, now. Jesus entered into Jerusalem at the

beginning of this chapter, and at the end of chapter 26, he will be dead and in the tomb. And, with the exception of Reformation Sunday and All Saints' Day, we will spend the next two months in the midst of this week. We will hear Jesus' final laments for Jerusalem, we will see Jesus' scathing remarks to the religious leaders, we will hear some of the most troubling parables...

So maybe it's good for us to kickstart this time together with the end of the vineyard parables and the song of a heartbroken God in our Isaiah text.

Throughout the Old Testament, vineyards are frequently metaphors for Israel. And today is no exception, but instead of the vineyard being a place of joy, plenty, and community, there's something rotten in Jerusalem. God's words in verse 4 remind me of the ways I honor Holy Week. "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?" God cries. I hear this verse echoed in the cries of the Solemn Reproaches often read on Good Friday: "O my people, O my church, what more could I have done for you?" The word chosen in verses 2 and 4 is not "wild grapes" in the Hebrew, but "stenches." When I expected it to yield grapes, one of the crucial crops of the ancient near east, why did it yield "stinking things"? Something is rotten in the vineyard.

And something is rotten and stinking in the vineyard in Jesus' parable, too. The parable never describes the smells, but again, we have a vineyard that should smell of fruit, but instead has at least three decaying bodies outside, with the blood of four more still staining the courtyard. And when bodies are not preserved, when bodies are just thrown over the wall and left to rot, they stink. But even more malodorous to the audience of Jesus' parable, the chief

priests and the Pharisees realize that Jesus was speaking about them. They realize that he is saying there is something rotten in their midst.

I wonder about myself in this text. Because it's easy to hold the text at an arm's length, critically examine what was going on historically, *why* Jesus might be accusing the chief priests and the Pharisees. To look at the ways they were participating in and benefiting from the unjust treatment of others, but washing their hands of it because *they* were not the ones actively oppressing anyone. *We*, of course, would never make such mistakes, never commit these sins...How often do we actually read these parables, and realize to our core, that God is speaking about us? How often do we realize that there is something rotten inside us?

Most of the time, I think we're oblivious to it until something snaps us out of our own world, where we do not have to see the consequences of our actions. Where we do not have to hear the cries of the oppressed. Where we can very easily sit back, fold our arms, and calmly discuss what someone else should have done to not be in the position they are in.

Our lectionary texts turn the church year into a circle. While Advent is officially the season for waiting for Jesus, the texts in the months leading up to Advent help to prepare us for that season. We see reminder after reminder of our own brokenness, our own sinfulness, our own need to confess and then repent, actually turn around and live out of our new life in Christ. We see reminder after reminder that we cannot do so on our own. That we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

Sometimes, before we can hear Christ as good news, we need our eyes opened to our need for Christ. Because Christ does change everything. He throws our systems and expectations upside down. He challenges our ways of thinking and being in the world. And when we long to return to what we know, transformation can feel like the trampling of the vineyard. Salvation doesn't always feel like good news if we manage to convince ourselves that we do not need to be saved. To trust that salvation is good news, to join with our ancestors in longing for the Messiah, we need to be reminded of our need for Messiah.

But we also live in a post-Easter world. We know the good news, that Messiah has come, that we have been saved. That we are being made new. It's a strange time in our lectionary year. But at the same time, it is our reality. That we live in the paradox: we know we have been saved, and yet our eyes are opened to the pain and brokenness in the world. To all the ways that we fail to live into God's kingdom. And so we prepare our hearts for the season of Advent, hearing and seeing again the pain of the world around us. And longing together for God's restoration and God's peace. These passages for these next few months move us to prayer and confession.

God, create in us new hearts. God, open our eyes to see you and to see the ways that we are grieving you. Remove the rot in our hearts and in our minds. Set us free to love you and our neighbors. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. Amen.