

## How's *Your* Vineyard Growing? Matthew 21:33-46, Proper 22A St.

Mark's Church, Cheyenne WY - Oct. 8 2017

Jesus has been telling vineyard stories. These are not bedtime stories. They are hard to listen to, if one is listening. He said to the Pharisees, "Listen to another parable" (the so-called Parable of the Wicked Tenants). He could have just said, "Hey you Pharisees, I'm going to lay another blast on you." Regardless of what you think about the Pharisees you've got to give them some credit today. They got it. They understood the parable. They heard Jesus. "They realized he was talking about *them*." Jesus held before them a truth they didn't like and they wanted to put a stop to it. They wanted to arrest him.

This is neither Jesus' first nor his last confrontation with the Pharisees. We tend to avoid those with whom we have conflict and confrontation. But not Jesus. He just keeps on coming. At every turn he is offending, aggravating, and confronting the Pharisees. He eats with the wrong people. He won't answer their questions. He taunts them by breaking the law and healing on the Sabbath. He calls them hypocrites and blind leaders. He escapes their traps. He leaves them speechless. He rattles off a string of "woes" against them. He compares them to a disobedient son who will not work in the vineyard. They just can't catch a break with Jesus. He never lets up.

So what's that all about? Why can't he just let go of them? And what does that have to do with us?

Is Jesus looking for a *fight*? I don't think so. Is his primary motivation *to expose and condemn* those who do not follow him? I don't think so. Is he *keeping score* and naming all the attitudes and behaviors of the Pharisees that he considers wrong? I don't think so. Is Jesus trying to *exclude* from the kingdom of God the religious leaders of his day? I don't think so.

Here's what I think these confrontations are about. Jesus is *unwilling to give up* on the Pharisees, or anyone else for that matter. Jesus is unwilling to give up on you or me. He just keeps on coming. That is

*the good news, hope, and joy* in today's parable. This is not so much a parable of exclusion or condemnation as it is a parable of Jesus' *unwillingness to give up*. His unwillingness to give up on *us* often confronts us with truth about our lives that is almost always difficult to hear and accept. We might hear his words but do we realize he is talking about us?

This parable and the confrontation this parable provokes are like a mirror held before us so that we might see and recognize in ourselves what Jesus sees and recognizes. This is not to condemn us but to recover us from the places of our self-exclusion, to call us back to life, and to lead us home.

Conventional wisdom presumes that *if you criticize something, you don't love it*. Wise people like the prophets, like Jesus, like those in our midst today would say the opposite. The wisest people are on the inside, but on the edge. They understand the insiders but can see through their distorted views. They don't confront people in order to condemn them but to show them their blindness so they can be transformed and see life as it is. It's a choice, to remain asleep or awakening to reality. I will tell you as a lad from Southeast Texas I wasn't raised to hear prophetic words as intended or speak them for that matter. I heard "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." To describe Jesus' manners in one word, he was nice! So I thought! That's what came through my filters. The paintings I saw of Jesus' face growing up in my church were not confrontational. They were mild and sentimental. That I could receive. Sound familiar?

*I admit it's hard, at least for me, to hear confrontation as rising from compassion*. Too often it's not. For their pains people who speak the truth, even in love, risk being killed. The prophets. Jesus. Martin Luther King. Mahatma Gandhi. And on and on. We hear and see it all the time; on social media and in the news for a start. But with Jesus **confrontation and compassion always go together**. I believe that. They always do. I believe they are two sides of the same coin. It takes both sides to make a coin.

Jesus doesn't exclude us or anyone else from the kingdom of God. He doesn't have to. We do it to ourselves and we're pretty good at it. That's what the Pharisees have done. The Pharisees have excluded themselves.

"The kingdom of God will be taken away from you," Jesus says to them. This is not so much a *punishment* for failing to produce kingdom fruits. It is, rather, the *recognition* of what already is. They were given the vineyard and failed to produce and share the fruits of the kingdom. Jesus is just naming the reality, the truth. They have *chosen* to exclude themselves. In the same way, the kingdom of God will be given to those who are already producing kingdom fruits. This is not a reward but recognition of what already is. Where the fruit is, there also is the kingdom. God plays no favorites here. No names, Jew or Christian included, no races, no cultures, no nations (including our own) in and by themselves have it made, are God's favorites and are great in themselves. God cares nothing for entitlements. God cares nothing for privilege, and will see to it that the fruit is going to be produced. Period. If God has a slogan, in this parable it is *Fruits first!*

If you want to know what the fruits of the kingdom look like then look at the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ. What do you see?

I see Love, intimacy, mercy and forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, presence, wisdom, truth, healing, reconciliation, self-surrender, joy, thanksgiving, peace, obedience, humility. I'm not talking about these things as abstract ideas but as living realities in the vineyards of our lives.

We've all been given vineyards. They are the people, relationships, circumstances and events of our lives that God has entrusted to our care. That means our spouse and marriage, children and family, our work, our church, our daily decisions and choices. Our hopes, dreams, and concerns are the vineyards in which we are to reveal the presence and life of God, to produce the fruits of the kingdom. The vineyards, our work in those vineyards, and the fruit produced come together to show us to be sharers in God's kingdom; or not.

To the degree we are not producing kingdom fruits we have excluded ourselves from, and rejected our share in, the kingdom. We are living neither as the people God knows us to be nor as the people we truly want to be. In some way we have stepped outside of ourselves and sidestepped our own life. That's the truth with which Jesus confronted the Pharisees. It's the same truth with which Jesus confronts you and me.

How does that happen? What does self-exclusion look like? Here's what I'm wondering.

- Do you ever struggle with perfectionism, self-condemnation, and the question of whether you're enough? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Do you ever feel like you have to be in control, be right, and have all the answers? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Are you carrying grudges, anger, resentment? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Do you look at others and begin making judgments about their belief, choices, or lifestyle? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Are there people in your life that you have chosen to let go of rather than do the work of healing the relationship? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Do you go through life on autopilot, going through the motions but never really being present, never showing up? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- In your life is there more criticism and cynicism than thanksgiving and celebration? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Are you hanging onto some old guilt that you believe could not be forgiven? Maybe that's self-exclusion.

The antidote to our self-exclusion from God's kingdom begins with first recognizing that self-exclusion. If we make life all about us that's self-exclusion. Instead of looking mostly or God help us, entirely at ourselves, it means you and I must look at the vineyards of our lives. So, how's your part of the vineyard, your garden growing? What do you see? Is there fruit? Is there life? Are you sharing in God's kingdom?

(With thanks to Michael K. Marsh for thoughts on this passage)

## OUTLINE

If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." "Be nice."  
"Jesus was nice." Paintings of Jesus. Sweet and sentimental. No he  
wasn't! It was the situation. With some people he was confrontational.  
I didn't grow up comfortable with confrontation.

How do you handle criticism? How do you give it? Here's a story

about Jesus in critical mode. Look how he behaved with the Pharisees.

At every turn he is offending, aggravating, and confronting the Pharisees. He eats with the wrong people. He won't answer their questions. He taunts them by breaking the law and healing on the Sabbath. He calls them hypocrites and blind leaders. He escapes their traps. He leaves them speechless. He rattles off a string of "woes" against them. He compares them to a disobedient son who will not work in the vineyard. They just can't catch a break with Jesus. He never lets up.

"If you criticize something, you don't love it." These days, it's criticize all you want! Today's polarization, eg politics, social media, mass killing. No, look at the prophets. They criticized the establishment. They warned, they begged.

When you see someone or something you love off the track, you criticize it. It comes with being a parent. Criticism/compassion are two sides of the same coin. Criticism by itself is ego judgment.

Jesus is not about condemnation or exclusion but being real and never giving up. He never gives up on us either. What's he after?

God wants his vineyards to produce fruit, regardless of who is tending them. *He plays NO favorites here.* God cares nothing for privilege, entitlements and one up-manship. Only for receptivity and availability, and the ability to respond, commonly called responsibility. If you want to be great, produce fruit. That you cannot do yourself. In God We Trust is not just a motto. If God has a motto, in this parable it's Fruits First!

If you want to know what the fruits of the kingdom look like, then look at the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ. What do you see? I see Love, intimacy, mercy and forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, presence, wisdom, truth, healing, reconciliation, self-surrender, joy, thanksgiving, peace, obedience, humility. I'm not talking about these things as abstract ideas but as living realities in the vineyards of our lives.

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## MOVEMENT

If you can't say something nice  
Jesus is nice  
No he isn't, sometimes! He blasted the Pharisees

If you criticize, you don't love - polarization  
The prophets and Jesus - insiders on the edge. crit. rising from  
compassion. Two sides of the same coin.  
Fruit first. What do you see?  
Pharisees: self exclusion. What about us? How do we self exclude?  
Examples  
Ending