

³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

⁴¹They said to him, “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.” ⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?’ ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Here we are once again: another parable, another vineyard. Three weeks in a row in our gospel readings has a vineyard cropped up in a parable. There is a lot going on in this particular parable, but we are fortunate that there are tools available to help us better understand it. The first tool is the broader picture of Matthew’s gospel. All of this gospel helps us understand this portion of

it, especially the parables that are closely connected to this one, some of which we have read the last two weeks. The second tool is Isaiah chapter 5. When Jesus told this parable, he was referencing vineyard imagery in that chapter that were used to describe events taking place. And the third tool is Mark's version of this parable. Mark's gospel predates Matthew's writing, and Matthew lifted this parable from Mark. However, Matthew made some changes to it. So when we compare and contrast Mark's version with Matthew's version, it sheds light on key points that Matthew really wants to get across to the reader.

If you've ever sat in on a Thursday Morning Bible Study or a Sunday School class with me, you know that I love walking through that process with others to discover the deeper messages in passages like this one. Unfortunately – or fortunately, depending on how you look at it – you and I don't have time to work through all three of those tools right now. So you will have to take my word when I cut to the chase. After looking at Matthew, Isaiah, and Mark, we discover that in this parable Jesus is trying to vividly express God's expectation that the people will pursue peace in this world and justice for the oppressed. That is the main thing for us to take away. Life in the reign of God is meant to be spent striving for justice and peace.

You might be wondering, though, "What the deal is with the tenants in the parable?" Of course they are an allusion to those specific chief priests whom Jesus is butting heads. However, the tenants are also more than that. Too often anyone who is Jewish is lumped with them, but that is wrong on two counts. First, most Jews yesterday and today have sought justice and peace, so they are on the right side of the parable. Second, if we are quick to associate anyone else with the tenants while not ever looking in the mirror with a critical eye, then we have grouped ourselves with the tenants.

The reason for that is because the tenants in the parable time-and-again reject the message that they are supposed to be cultivating justice and peace in this world. The parable is asking us to constantly look in the mirror with a critical eye to see if we are pursuing peace in this world and justice for the oppressed. If we aren't willing to look in that mirror, or if we bristle at the words "justice" and "peace," then that is not far from the behavior of the tenants in the parable, who

repeatedly refused to hear God's expectations for them in the vineyard because they knew better or because they believed they deserved to be in the vineyard.

There is also that ending of the parable that we must contend with, where Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." What does that look like? Although it sounds like end-of-time judgment stuff, it also plays out in the world around us. One contemporary example is what has transpired recently with the Canadian indigenous residential schools. This network of boarding schools existed for 120 years, starting in the late 1800s and the last school closed in 1997. The network was authorized by the Canadian government and it was administered by Christian churches. During those decades, the indigenous children who were sent to these schools had their languages, customs, and families intentionally and systematically stripped from them. They know of over 4,000 indigenous children who died at these schools, many left in unmarked graves. Those atrocities were largely committed by Christians, who – like the tenants in the parable – felt they knew best and that they deserved that land. "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." Those institutions have been bulldozed, and the survivors of these schools and indigenous communities have the authority to decide how these sites are used. Quite often what they choose is to make them into memorials. In some locations, the decision was to build a community center in order to bring people together and have their needs met. You see, God will make sure that the vineyard produces the fruit of justice and peace.

There is an innate psychological desire in us to avoid confrontations with uncomfortable truths. Our defenses go up, excuses are made, and deflections are cast. We see it happen all the time whenever someone's plight is revealed. Time and again we have examples of people on soapboxes who find excuses to discredit or villainize people whose voices are crying out. As we watch the war break out in the Gaza Strip and Israel, be careful that you do not listen to voices who label entire populations as evil, corrupt, or bloodthirsty.

We must condemn acts of atrocity and those who commit them. While that is done, be careful to not listen to people with megaphones who seek to dehumanize entire peoples and want

you to judge entire populations. Just remember that the majority of people in both the Israeli and the Palestinian populations desire peace first and foremost. It is a matter of what must be done to achieve it that has been so stubbornly difficult to work out. Perhaps the best words for us to say as we look at what is unfolding in that region is that simple, ancient prayer of ours: “Lord, have mercy.”

Jesus teaches that we need to look in the mirror. We need to check if we have a “we know best” outlook. We need to let go of the notion that “we deserve” something more than other people. We need to confront any tendency to care only for ourselves. Jesus teaches that because he knows that our neighbors need us to do it: those neighbors here with us, and neighbors oceans away. They need us to be self-reflective people who seek justice and peace. Our gracious God desires for us – and all people – to experience wholeness in this life, and self-centeredness is detrimental to that. The more that we open ourselves to the stories and the needs of others around us, the more that this vineyard we live in will produce the justice and the peace that God is cultivating.

Thanks be to God. Amen.