

**Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
(Oct. 5, 2014)**

Sour Grapes?

Probably a number of you are gardeners, people who like to plant seeds or shrubs and watch them grow, bud, and blossom or bear fruit. I wonder if you could identify with the owner of the vineyard in both of the parables we just heard, from Isaiah and from Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. In the first instance the owner was greatly disappointed that his vineyard did not produce good grapes, and his reaction was, to say the least, rather extreme. But then if your plants do not blossom and bear fruit, maybe the only sensible thing to do is to tear them up and begin all over again. I don't know that, not being a gardener myself.

The image of the vineyard is a common one in the Old Testament. It represents the relationship of God to the people of God, and God's disappointment when the people are not faithful is rather poignantly expressed when the owner says, "What more could I have done for you that I did not do?" That's God speaking to the people.

Jesus picks up this parable in a fierce warning to the religious leaders of his own time. He expands it and makes more explicit what Isaiah had only hinted at – and that is the injustice, especially the violence that the leaders are guilty of. Isaiah had said, "God looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed, for justice, but hark, the outcry." The outcry of an oppressed people. In Jesus' parable the violence is given a much more prominent role. The owner sends his servants – on two occasions – to collect what is rightfully his and the tenants beat them, stone them, and kill them. Finally he sends his son and they kill him, too. The servants represent the prophets that God had sent to the people and who were rejected. The son obviously represents Jesus who will be treated the same way. No wonder God was disappointed. "What more could I have done for you that I have not done?" It's a warning – a very strong warning. "The Kingdom," Jesus says, "will be taken away from you and given to a people that will yield a rich harvest." But because it's a warning, they have time to change, to repent and be converted.

As always we have to make this parable actual for ourselves. What is it saying to us? In Isaiah's parable God says, "I looked for justice, but hark, the outcry," the outcry of an oppressed people, and in the Old Testament that means the widows, the orphans, and the aliens, the weakest members of the community, those who could not provide for themselves or who could only do so with great difficulty. It seems to me the parallels in our own time are only too obvious. For widows, orphans, and aliens understand women, children, and immigrants and you have a pretty good idea of what God is trying to say to us today. Who are the most oppressed, the most disadvantaged, the most vulnerable people in our society? Who are the weakest, those who have great difficulty providing for themselves? The effects of natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, tornados, and floods have given us an all too vivid picture of who those people might be. The seriousness of Jesus' warning becomes only too clear when we realize that he identifies with these people. Remember the parable of the Last Judgment which we are going to hear in a few Sundays. "As long as you did or did not do it for the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did or did not do it for me." Strong language, that!

Our care for the weaker, poorer members of the kingdom is part of our stewardship of God's vineyard, a vineyard that is full of the riches of God's love and mercy. "What more could I have done for you that I have not done?" God's tender, loving care is unfathomable. All God asks in return is faithfulness. You may have heard the story of Mother Teresa being interviewed by a journalist who asked her, "Mother, do you feel you have been successful?" She answered, "God does not ask us to be successful. God only asks us to be faithful." And this fidelity, this faithfulness is not simply obedience to impersonal laws, but the kind of response that wells up in us when we know we are loved and cherished and cared for, the kind of faithfulness that seeks to respond to God's love wholeheartedly. As the psalmist says, "What return shall I make to the Lord for all that he has done for me?"

Now in the light of what has been going on in our country and in the world in recent years it seems to me the Gospel parable is even more appropriate for us today. Any number of people have claimed that one of the major factors that caused the financial crisis we have been facing is

greed – greed and selfishness. And that’s exactly what’s going on in the parable. It’s because of greed that the tenants beat and kill those sent by the owner to collect what is his, and finally kill his son thinking that the vineyard will be then be theirs. Jesus could well be speaking this parable to us today. If only those of us who claim to be Christians could take Jesus’ words to heart, the world would be very different.

Responding to the challenge of God, whether it is the God who speaks through Isaiah, or the God who speaks through Jesus Christ, can seem an overwhelming task at times. And yet our Christian commitment demands that we respond to the best of our ability – that we be faithful. Certainly one of the reasons we come here to share the Eucharist is to show our willingness to accept the challenge and to pray for the courage, the conviction needed to meet the problems we face and do what we can to alleviate the sufferings of others. Our Christian response has to move us from this Eucharistic celebration back to our daily lives where we can be instruments in the hand of God to make our city, our nation, our world a better place to live in, to make it truly the vineyard of the Lord.