

“Necessary Reflection”

Psalms 19:1-14; Philippians 3:4b-14;  
Matthew 21:33-46

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As I turned to the scripture this week, I was really hoping for a scripture that would be compassionate and give us some encouragement in the midst of these difficult times. I am following the lectionary, which is a set of scriptures that are laid out for us to use each Sunday. As I read this particular parable, I didn't feel comforted and I almost decided to find something else. But it felt like I needed to stick with it, to see what it is telling us in the midst of these times.

It begins in a fairly comforting way. It reminds us of God's gift of the garden, and the vineyard. Out of God's largess, he invites these folks to live in his vineyard, and through that gift, to produce what a vineyard produces. To produce fruit, and probably turn that fruit into wine. To have the produce of that place to share. In fact, if we think about the whole history of the people of God as it begins to be shaped in Abraham, God invites them to be a blessing for all people.

God gives this gift of a vineyard. A vineyard is often used as a description of the people of God, the Israelites. The people of God, who are in relationship with God, are to live in a way to be a light to the nations, to model what it means to be God's people. As we hear this parable, there is a lot of history that goes with it. People would recognize fairly quickly when Jesus started talking about the vineyard that he was talking about the history of God's people, thus, Israel's history.

If I were putting in a vineyard, I wouldn't really know for sure what to do, how to really make the grapes grow best. I think what he's pointing out here would have been obvious to the agrarian folk of that time, given their background. God gave them a covenant and God gave them the commandments and instructions on how to be God's people. Underneath that is the sense that he's already instructed them on how to live in the vineyard, how to produce what he's asking. It's in their history. It's in the covenant. It's in the commandments. It's in the instructions that he's given.

As we think about what they heard Jesus saying and how it struck them in terms of their history, I think we also have to think about how we hear this parable, how it fits for us. What is the underlying way we have been taught to live in the vineyard? We not only have the covenant and the commandments and the instructions, we also have the words and teachings and guidance of Jesus. He invites us to live in the vineyard, to be God's people who live with the gift he's given us and allow it to produce what he would like to see—a blessing to the nations.

Now back to that piece that I struggle with, that I am uncomfortable with. It seems that after God gives this gift, if we think about the master in this case as being God, he goes away. I usually don't think about God ever going away. I think that what this points to is that God is in some ways suggesting, "You have some responsibility. You are going to be accountable for yourself. I'm not going to micromanage what you do. I've given you the instructions. I've given you the commandments. I've given you (us) the teachings of Jesus."

Even in the passage we read a few weeks ago where the king gives mercy to the servant, he doesn't follow the servant around and say, "You have to give mercy here and here." No, he expects that servant to know and to live it out. It's an incredible moment of thinking about how God is giving us a place to be, a vineyard to live in, and inviting us to live according to the way God has shown us.

This parable continues to go on with fairly uncomfortable ways of describing us, or at least describing the people of Israel over time because Jesus said it really wasn't working out. They weren't living into the gift in a way that fruit was being produced and shared. They weren't being a blessing to the nations, so God began to send messengers. Messenger after messenger. What we hear is how they responded to the messengers.

I would like to just note that everybody who heard what Jesus was saying probably understood that those messengers were the prophets. This is the point where it would really behoove us to go back and take a look at what all the prophets said over time. I don't want to do that right now, but I do want to offer you at least this passage from Isaiah 59. I just tried to find a few summary statements, and Isaiah 59 is one of those.

*It says: Justice is turned back; righteousness stands at a distance. The truth stumbles in the public square. Uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled. The Lord saw and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene, so his own arm brought him victory and his righteousness upheld him.*

I think these messages of the Old Testament would have been in the minds of the hearers of Jesus. They would have recognized what he was saying: that somehow they weren't living up to the message that the prophets had brought and instead were showing a violence, a disregard for the righteousness and justice God desired.

If you look at the prophets, there are basically two things the prophets are focused on. One is you seem to not care who your God is; you are going after idols and looking for power in other places. He's basically saying you have given up on the love of God

with your heart, mind, soul, and strength, which Jesus invites us again to. The second piece is that in some way you are oppressing one another. You are not treating each other well. You don't know how to love your neighbor as yourself.

Out of that we recognize that in this parable the master is not happy. After all of that, after the violence that is used by the people to try to solve their problem with God's messengers, their disregard for what they bring, God still continues to come. Finally, the point of this passage, I think, is that God sends his own son. The master sends his own son. It says, "they will respect him." That word, respect, has a sense that because he is important to the master, they should pay attention. Indeed, behind this word is the idea that they should give due regard and attend to the message, and it should cause a wholesome shame which leads one to consider the conditions of one's position, one's behavior, one's life. Sending the son to the people of the vineyard was a way of asking them to do the necessary reflection they needed to do so they could return to being God's people. They could know the grace of God and live in it. Their lives could begin to actually produce the fruit that God is looking for.

We know that in this story, this parable, Jesus predicts his death. We look back and see that the son of God was not received then, but was killed as this parable describes. The necessary reflection was never done. This parable leaves me wondering how I am not hearing the messengers of God. Am I in some way doing them some kind of violence? We don't tend to take people out and stone them anymore, but we still pelt them with our insults. We still pelt them with disbelief or disdain. Am I hearing the messengers of God? Am I listening to the teachings of Jesus and allowing that to be what shapes my life? What kind of necessary reflection do I need to do?

The problem is that this is written not just to me, not just to us as individuals. It is written to us, because it was written to a people. The story of Israel was about the people of God. Any time folks who see themselves as a people of God it is written to that group to do the necessary reflection together. We need to do the necessary reflection to be the people of God. We need to recognize the gift that God has given us, the grace God has shown us, and the wonder of what God has enabled for us. We need to recognize the life God has given us and how, in that life, there is an expectation that through that relationship that we have with God, the grace that God gives us, we will extend that grace. We will produce the fruits of the kingdom, is the way Jesus puts it here at the end.

If I weren't already uncomfortable enough with this parable, I am particularly uncomfortable with the ending. I'm uncomfortable with the way Jesus suggests these folks are not going to do the necessary reflection and in not doing the necessary reflection there will be consequences. They know what a human master would do. He

would come and throw them out and destroy them. Jesus doesn't quite say that's exactly what God would do, but he does talk about how they will stumble and if they stumble over the stone it can crush them or destroy them. He is suggesting there are real consequences when we don't do the necessary reflection. That makes me incredibly uncomfortable, but feels pretty real.

What is the necessary reflection we need to do right now? Have we heard the prophets? Have we heard the teachings of Jesus? Do we listen and understand what it means to be a people together? If we call ourselves a people of God, how are we living that out? Are we showing the very grace and goodness of God in the midst of our lives? It's not the message I was looking for in the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of all our struggle, but it is the message of Jesus in this parable to do the necessary reflection.

Are we a blessing to the nations, particularly on this day? Today is World Communion Sunday. It's a day we remember that Jesus came and is a blessing to the nations, and that we are part of an incredible family of faith that stretches beyond our borders—the borders of our community, the borders of our state, the borders of our nation, the borders of our globe, the borders of our minds. God blesses the nations in Christ and invites us to the table.

We don't often talk much about it, but the table is also a time we are invited to do a necessary reflection because we are invited to see if we are ready to come. What is going on in our lives? Who are we struggling with? Where do we have that disagreement? Where are the struggles and the broken relationships? What needs to be healed? We are to pay attention to that before we even come. We are invited to do that necessary reflection and find, as we come, the very grace of God. We are invited to reflect on the grace given us in Jesus Christ, that we might be his people, might know that grace, and might become a people of God gathered around the table to be a people of grace and goodness, to be the people of the vineyard who demonstrate the fruits of the kingdom.

We have been given that grace, the very love of God in Jesus Christ shown to us on the cross, enabling us to know that our sin is forgiven and that we can live into the kingdom, into the goodness of God. This parable reminds me to do the necessary reflection and to come and ask again for the mercy of God, and to look at my life and to see how I might leave here doing God's will, how I can lift the justice and righteousness God expects, the fruit of the kingdom to be present in my life, in our life, in the life of the people of God. Amen.