

Pentecost XVII (September 27, 2020)

Text: Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46

“How Easily We See ‘Them’!”

The background of Jesus’ parable in today’s Gospel is the parable delivered by the prophet Isaiah from today’s First Lesson. Every one of Jesus’ listeners that day would have made that connection. The concept of the vineyard as a symbol for Israel was solidly enmeshed in Jewish thinking.

Unfortunately, the people around Jesus would have zeroed in on just the opening lines of Isaiah’ poem, and tended to disregard the rest. ***“Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill,”*** is a very nice start to the message Isaiah was directed to speak to Israel. It starts as a love-song — who doesn’t want to be the object/subject of a love-song? The image of a vineyard is a very beautiful one — drive east on I-90 into western New York, and you can see for yourself the vineyards of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York.

Moreover, the “beloved’s” vineyard in this poem is set ***“on a very fertile hill.”*** Indeed, the opening lines of the poem come with soothing, gladdening images. But it quickly changes tone: ***“When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?”*** Something has gone wrong — it is clearly not the result of some neglect or misbehavior by the owner of the vineyard. He did everything right: ***“He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it . . .”*** In spite of all that tender care and attention, the vineyard turned out to be a bust — wild grapes are not suitable for eating or winemaking: not enough moisture or sugar content for either enterprise.

That Israel so blithely ignored the full impact of this parable-poem, this love-song, should not surprise us. How often do we take some message and focus on the part that we want to hear? Through inattention or

downright willful ignoring, we get the parts that we think we need. As Paul Simon so poignantly reminded us in his lyric: “*A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.*”¹ All too often, the parts we disregard are what carry the full weight.

That’s the message from Jesus in the parable from today’s Gospel. The tenants of the vineyard are overblown characters, to be sure. One can understand a tenant missing a payment or two, or ten, or even forty. What tenant has not been late with the rent on at least one occasion? It’s a fairly common occurrence. When it comes to missing a second or third month, owners tend to be less than forgiving about extending more credit.

So, had the message of this parable been that God’s people had fallen a tad behind in their fealty to God, all that would have necessary was to remind them the rent was due. But these characters no longer consider themselves tenants; they have assumed the prerogatives of ownership. Not once, but twice they abuse the agents sent to them to collect the payment that was due.

I was watching a show about women in comedy on YouTube and the show “Roseanne” was featured, with the bit about how she kept the creditors at bay: She would send the check but “forget” to sign it; she would send the check for the electric company to the gas company and vice-versa; and she would send the bill back with no check included. If you think those are good ideas, I suggest to you that you might — might! — succeed with one of them once, but that’s all. But you’re not about to beat up the guy the utility sends to turn off the gas or electricity or water; they will arrest you for that.

These tenants have moved beyond tricks to avoid payment; they are set on getting rid of the owner. When he sends his son to retrieve what is rightfully his, he thinks, “***They will respect my son.***” They should have; that was not an unreasonable expectation. But then, they should have respected the first two sets of emissaries.

But listen to the reaction of these tenants: “***This is the heir; come, let us***

kill him and get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.” They think that by killing the heir, the vineyard will be theirs — on what basis of law one cannot begin to try to fathom. Perhaps they believe that the owner will never again show his face in these precincts, so there will be no day of reckoning. Perhaps they believe the owner is too feckless to do anything in response. Perhaps (and I think this the more likely) they let their greed get ahead of any common sense and blindly act to get what they want.

What’s amazing about the owner of the vineyard is the lengths to which he is willing to go for these tenants. I suspect had some people beat up my agents, I would not have sent another round of emissaries to intercede — I’d call in the cops and maybe the militia. But this owner does not respond with force or violence; he responds with the hope that he can turn these tenants back to rational behavior. In sending the son, he pays them a compliment, as if to say, *“You people have no idea how far afield you have gone; but I am willing to let the past stay in the past.”* From any perspective other than that of Jesus, this owner acts foolishly.

Matthew tells us, ***“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.”*** Their reaction to that insight is precisely the reaction of the tenants in the parable: they want to kill him. The tenants had no concept of any outside force that might thwart their designs for claiming the vineyard, but Jesus’ opponents do. ***“They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.”*** So their murderous intent is stymied by the fervor of the crowd (at least for now).

Jesus had for some time been pressing on these “leaders of Israel,” and these vineyard parables amp up the reproach. Two weeks ago, we heard the parable of the workers hired at varying times of the day all of whom received the same wage; again the message was aimed at the leadership who considered themselves “in” and all others “out” and who were going to be very surprised at the end how that turns out. Jesus told them then, ***“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”***

Last week we heard of the two sons sent to work in the vineyard, the clear message of which was that these leaders were going to be on the outside looking in when the Kingdom appeared. Jesus announced to them: ***“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”***

And now today, the strongest condemnation of them all: *You people seem to think that the Kingdom is all yours! You would even destroy the ones God sends to you rather than admit how badly you have turned God’s grace into burdensome rules. You think you can dictate who gets in and who stays out, so you look down your noses at any and all whom you think don’t measure up.*

Then Jesus pops the question: ***“Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”*** They don’t yet see themselves in the parable; so they reply: ***“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.”*** and thus pass sentence on themselves. They see the injustice in the story; they just think they are above it. Imagine their anger — their seething hatred toward Jesus — when he lowers the boom on them: ***“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.”***

I have said it many times before: the opponents of Jesus did not seek to put Him to death for things that He did, but for the things that He said. Here before us is evidence of that assessment. They were incensed at His constantly pointing out how they had arrived at such a high opinion of themselves they could not recognize the God who had called them to be His chosen. They had come to the conclusion that their behaviors, their hypervigilant adherence to what they had determined would please God, was everything. They could not reconcile themselves to the idea that they could in any way not be considered God’s most favored — indeed, God’s only-favored.

It took a while for Jesus’ message to sink in that they were “them.”

“Them” is such an ugly category. “Them” is the terminology of those who want to mark others as “less than.” So many people walk around with that message having been driven into them: Less than smart enough; less than tall enough; less than good enough; less than fast enough; less than pretty enough

Those who deliver the “them” message, Jesus is saying, are themselves the ones who are less than: Less than compassionate; less than accepting; less than honorable; less than ready for the Kingdom of God.

We have to ask ourselves — repeatedly — are we delivering the “them” message? Do we see ourselves as better than others? Do we see ourselves as somehow ahead of the pack in virtue? Do we consider others as “out” but we ourselves as “in”? When we do that, we climb into the status enjoyed by the chief priests and Pharisees, and Jesus wants to call us away from that.

Jesus often got angry with these leaders for two reasons: 1) They were leaders, but they were leading in the wrong direction. 2) They would not look at themselves in the mirror and see what Jesus saw in them. But as angry as He may have gotten at them, Jesus loved them still. It is hard to stay angry at those who do not matter to you. They mattered to Jesus; He wanted them restored.

The leaven of the Pharisees sits within each one of us; it is like we are primed to look around and spot “them.” The leaven of the Pharisees is always just on the verge of puffing us up. So we need to be in constant prayer that Jesus send His Spirit to keep us from “us/them” thinking and lead us to “us/we” thinking. Lest we fall into the trap that leads us away from Christ and we watch “them” enter the Kingdom.

Amen.

¹ Paul Simon, “The Boxer” Copyright © 1968.