

God's Vineyard Matthew 21:33-46

As we get closer and closer to the Iowa Caucuses, we start hearing more and more soundbites from candidates trying to get us to vote for them, or trying to get us to not vote for their opponents. Even just trying to watch the Iowa State football game, many of the commercials are from candidates or their PACs.

Of course, the goal is to get a positive soundbite to stick in people's minds, but sometimes it's the negative soundbites that stick better. A little over 10 years ago, when President Obama was campaigning for a second term, he talked about the role of government in helping business. "Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business, you didn't build that." Suddenly, that phrase, you didn't build that, became the focus of attack ads.

In today's lessons, we hear God telling the Israelites and the Jews that "You didn't build that." God sings of how much he has done for the vineyard, how he built it up. Yet the people started thinking the land is theirs to do with as they wish, instead of remembering they're tenants on God's land.

So God warns that he will start again. The warning comes through Isaiah, but not only Isaiah. Other prophets, other servants of God are sent again and again to call the people of Israel, the tenants of God's vineyard, to account. And time and time again, the prophets are mistreated, persecuted, punished, and even killed.

The warnings would finally come true after Isaiah's time, when the Israelites would be taken into exile. Their vineyards would be destroyed by the Babylonian army. The people would be mistreated, punished, even killed, and

the survivors taken to Babylon. Even God's temple, the symbol of God's presence with them, would be destroyed.

Jesus draws on that when he tells the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. The Pharisees would especially have known scripture well enough to know Isaiah's song of the vineyard. They knew the words of the prophets. Yet they thought they'd heard them. They thought their rules and regulations would keep them from breaking God's laws and facing God's wrath again. They thought they were bearing the fruit of righteousness God desired for them.

Instead, they were bearing bad fruit. They'd started to think they were in control, and weren't merely tenants. They were ignoring God's commands just as their ancestors had. And they reacted to prophets like John the Baptist and teachers like Jesus in the same way their ancestors did. And so Jesus, like prophets before him, tries to get their attention through a story.

The story begins with a wealthy householder who carefully plants a vineyard—a place for growing grapes and producing wine on his property. A landowner has planted a vineyard that is fully equipped for wine production. He leases it to a group of tenants and departs for another country. They didn't build it – they just get to work it, in exchange for a share of the harvest and the profits.

The imagery in this parable immediately evokes the theme of God's people as the stewards of a garden. The book of Genesis opens with God putting humanity in a garden to "till it and keep it." God had originally intended for women and men to serve as his stewards over all creation.

Later on in the Old Testament, God describes his people Israel as an unfruitful vineyard. In other words, Jesus' hearers would have recognized that Jesus' parable in Matthew 21 was not some hypothetical story but one directed at them.

More than that, from our Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 5:1-7) we discover that God is the master of the house and the owner of the vineyard. And God's people, the nation of Israel, is the vineyard. Who, then, are the tenants—the workers of the vineyard? They are the nation's leaders, the people entrusted with the cultivation and care of the vineyard while the master is away. As tenant farmers, they were responsible to grow and harvest the grapes, press the wine, and pay a portion of the net harvest to the master.

Then we get to the challenging part. "While the landlord was away," said Jesus, "the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another." Then the owner sent his own son, but the tenants "seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him."

Jesus then asked the chief priests and the Pharisees what they thought the owner of the vineyard would do to those wicked tenants. "He will put those wretches to a miserable death," they responded, "and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." Jesus gave them a nod and let them know that the story was a judgment on them. Therefore I tell you," said Jesus, "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."

A sense of propriety over a space is one of the problems in the parable. The tenants felt a degree of ownership of and entitlement to the vineyard and its produce that was not true

of their lease agreement. You didn't build this, you don't own this, Jesus was telling the audience, especially the chief priests and Pharisees. Everything you have, everything you are, is a gift from God for you to tend accordingly.

No, what has happened here is that those responsible for overseeing the production and distribution of the fruit have, deliberately and maliciously, taken over the vineyard and its produce for themselves. They are assuming complete and total ownership of the fruit and its distribution solely for themselves, with no thought whatsoever for the needs, rights and wishes of the landowner. They are driving out the landowner and his proxies. So this is where we must look for our parallels today, and not simply to shortcomings, weaknesses or neglect. This is about something even more basic: It is about giving the fruit to the landowner at harvest time and not keeping it for oneself.

When the Pharisees see the tenants are in the wrong, they see Jesus is preaching against them. The Pharisees hear Jesus saying God is threatening to start from scratch again. That threatens them and their way of life. Instead of repenting, instead of turning back to God, they start to do what the wicked tenants did. They start plotting to kill God's Son. They plot to kill Jesus.

Jesus, the Son of a God who can sometimes seem like an absentee landlord, would be killed by the Pharisees soon after he tells this parable. He'd be killed by the very Pharisees who recognized themselves as the tenants in Jesus' parable. And like the tenants in the parable, they would be punished, as the Romans destroyed the vineyards of Judah, along with Jerusalem and the temple Jesus stands by.

But the greatest punishment of all would go on Jesus. All of the punishment all of the sin and rebellion of the people of Israel deserved, all of the punishment all of the sin and rebellion of the Pharisees deserved, all of the punishment all of our sin and rebellion deserves was on Jesus on the cross. Through that, God's vineyard was restored. Through Jesus taking on our punishment, we are forgiven and freed to bear fruit for God.

We didn't make the world. We didn't build all that we've been given. And far too often we try to take credit, and not give God His due. That sin deserves God's punishment. But while we could focus on God's wrath in these lessons, we need to instead focus on God's mercy. The mercy that made something out of nothing in the first place, and graciously gives it to us. The mercy that kept sending prophets to call the people to repentance. The mercy that sent Jesus into the world. The mercy that sent Jesus to the cross. The mercy that expanded the kingdom of God to all people. The mercy that restores and re-creates the world. We didn't make God's mercy, but we receive it because of what Jesus did for us. What a wonderful promise.

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