

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

By Julie Neraas

Open a bible, light a candle beside it, and place ripe grapes, and a bottle of wine or grape juice at the center.

LEADER: We gather to break open the word of God.

ALL: As the ancient prophets heard a word from God necessary in their time—

LEADER: May we hear a word that is needed in ours.

ALL: May the Holy Spirit empower us to live out this message in our lives.

For three Sundays straight the gospels have featured parables about growing grapes, a demanding enterprise in ancient times and our own. The state of Washington, where I grew up, ranks second in the U.S. in the production of wine, behind only California. It is a \$2 billion business. The state has invested in this enterprise and expects a great return.

Surprisingly grapes grow well during days of long sunlight in our desert regions, where the soil is sandy and stone-studded. It seems counterintuitive, but grapes don't like soil that is too nutrient rich. Furthermore, Washington's sandy loam creates

an inhospitable environment for pests (perhaps not unlike the Middle East).

The prophet Isaiah uses the image of planting a vineyard to describe God's relationship to Israel; God is the vine grower and "the people of Judah God's pleasant planting." This is Sunday's first reading. Like being a spouse or a parent, being a vintner requires a lot of work. The process has at least a dozen steps—choosing the type of grape to grow, preparing vine cuttings, selecting a location, preparing the soil, building trellises, knowing when to plant, when to prune.

God invests heavily in the people of Israel: giving them a leader in Moses, bringing them out of Egypt, providing guidance through the ten commandments, planting them in a new land. To God, all the work of the vineyard is worth it. In fact, God so invests in this people that God can see no other care to lavish on them. "What

more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done?" God asks. This caring attitude toward the people distinguishes Israel's God from the gods of others.

Israel is God's chief glory, in the same way that drinking good wine is a crowning pleasure, worth a high price. And when like a parent God has poured out everything for the people, their infidelity hurts. God takes the poor yield personally, asking, "When I expected my vineyard to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?"

● In what or who have you invested yourself only to have the project or relationship bear no fruit?



GOSPEL

Who rejects, who accepts Jesus?



NARRATOR: When the chief priests and elders of the people asked Jesus by whose authority he was teaching in the temple, he spoke to them in parables.

JESUS: Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug out a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and went to another country. When harvest time came, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his share of the grapes. The tenants seized the slaves, beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. The landowner sent other slaves, more than before. The tenants treated them the same way. Finally the landowner sent his son to them.

LANDOWNER: They will respect my son.

JESUS: But when they saw the son, the tenants said to one another—

TENANTS: Here is the heir. Let us kill him; then we will have his inheritance!

JESUS: With that the tenants seized the son, dragged him outside the vineyard, and killed him. When the Lord of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

CHIEF PRIESTS: He will put that wicked crowd to a miserable death.

ELDERS: And lease his vineyard out to others who will see to it that he has grapes at harvest time.

JESUS: Have you never read in the scriptures: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was God’s doing. It is amazing in our eyes”? For this reason, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will yield a rich harvest.

Matthew 21:33-43

hailing Jesus as messiah the same way the people who welcome him to the city do.

Needless to say the welcome, the upheaval at the temple, the healings, and the acclaim anger the chief priests, scribes, and elders who witness these things. No wonder they question by whose authority Jesus is teaching in the temple as Sunday’s gospel passage begins.

In this volatile situation, Jesus tells a parable rather than confront the officials directly. A parable draws its hearers into thinking about events in a story and about what the characters ought to do. A parable works like a mirror in which hearers can see their actions. In deciding what the characters should do, they are making judgments that reflect their values.

As Jesus sets the scene of his parable, he echoes the prophet Isaiah’s description of all the work God does to plant the vineyard that is the house of Israel. Then Jesus introduces a new role in the vineyard—the tenant.

● What is your experience of being a tenant?

● What is your experience of being an owner who rents to others?

The parable of the tenants reflects first-century conflicts. Economically in Jesus’ time, 95% of the people were poor peasants who worked hard to

Entitlement, gratitude struggle in us.

Sunday’s gospel comes from Matthew 21, which begins with Jesus entering Jerusalem, the scene churches today celebrate on Palm Sunday. As his first action in the city, Jesus goes to the temple, drives out the sellers, and overturns the tables of the moneychangers. He

reclaims the temple as a place of prayer. His actions antagonize the priests who serve there.

Only Matthew’s gospel tells us that after Jesus cleanses the temple, the blind and lame come to him there, and he heals them. Those he heals proclaim, “Hosanna to the Son of David,”

survive. Roman soldiers from the occupying army often received land as payment for their military service and kept peasants as tenants to cultivate and tend their vineyards.

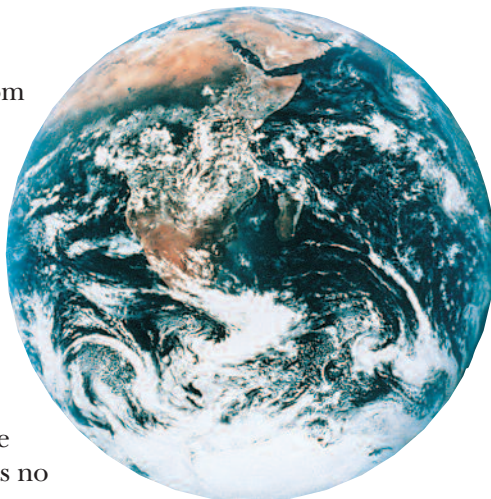
Poor, overtaxed peasants might have reason to resent and resist giving a Roman owner a share of the harvest. But the parable has no hint of this political motive. These tenants simply want the whole harvest and the vineyard for themselves.

When Jesus invites the chief priests and elders to judge what the owner should do, they insist the rebellious tenants should be put to death. They don't identify as tenants whose work is to cultivate and care for the people. They see themselves as entitled owners.

Matthew has arranged the gospel narrative in this chapter, so we readers know Jesus is teaching and caring for poor people in the temple, the very place where these leaders should be serving God's people.

● **Who needs care in our churches today that we are not seeing?**

We humans are all tenants of Earth and like those in the parable, our basest instincts are to draw everything to ourselves, the "owner" be damned. God has given us a precious vineyard/planet/home, teeming with life and extraordinary resources, but we have fouled



our nest, mistaking God's gifts for our possessions. Our greed has put our precious planet in grave danger.

Nearly nine centuries ago the mystic Hildegard of Bingen said, "In the people that were meant to be green, there is no life of any kind...the winds are burdened by the utterly awful stink of...selfish goings-on... The air belches out filthy uncleanness...a loathsome darkness...withers the green and wizens the fruit that was meant to serve as food..." No wonder this newly recognized Doctor of the Church speaks to people concerned with ecology.

● **Imagine what Hildegard might write about us today.**

● **What can draw us together as we tend our beautiful and fragile Earth?**

If there is hope for us, it is Jesus' message writ large across his life and death: whatever happens, love will not leave. Significantly this parable doesn't end with its parallel to Jesus' death. Christian tradition attaches a resurrection image. Jesus is the stone once rejected that has become the cornerstone of a new community.

The gospel is quoting from Psalm 118.22 to interpret who Jesus is. He is God's Son, the inheritor of the vineyard. A homonym, words that sound alike, connects the parable and the quotation. In Hebrew the word for *son* is *ben*, and the word for *stone* is *eben*. Jesus, who was crucified just as the stone was rejected, becomes in his resurrection the cornerstone on which a new community arises.

● **What reservoirs of goodness in us can God draw on as together we tend our beautiful and fragile communities of faith?**

Social action has two feet.



● Each week *Sunday by Sunday* suggests social actions that groups can do. Charity is one foot of social action. Charity is about responding to people's immediate needs—serving a meal at a shelter, stocking a food pantry. Justice is the second foot. Justice work often involves partnering with organizations that research and advocate for systemic change in areas of public policy, especially policies that offer a hand up for people who are poor.

Isaiah sings God's disappointment.

Song of the Vineyard

Let me sing a love song
about my friend's vineyard:

My friend had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.

He dug it, cleared it of stones,
and planted the choicest vines.

Within it he built a watchtower
and hewed out a wine vat.

He expected a harvest of grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.

Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah, judge between
me and my vineyard:

What more was there to do for my
vineyard that I had not done?
I expected it to yield grapes;
why did it yield wild grapes?

I will tell you what I will do
to my vineyard:

I will take down its hedge,
so animals can graze it.

I will break down its wall,
so it will be trampled!

I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed.

It will be overgrown
with briars and thorns.

I will command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is
the house of Israel.

The people of Judah
are God's planting.

God looked for justice
but saw bloodshed;

God looked for righteousness
but heard a cry.

Isaiah 5:1-7

We can hear the rejected lover and the spurned parent speak in Isaiah's words. God looks for peace; we are prone to violence. God expects community, justice, equality, and generous sharing of resources. We should be a people in whom the fruits of the Spirit are abundant—love, kindness, patience, humility, forgiveness.

The vineyard has an owner, who is deeply invested in its well-being and who can't keep from singing a song to the beloved. This is a hidden blessing. If God did not care, God could simply walk away; it wouldn't matter. Easy come, easy go.

If nothing counts against one, nothing counts. But actions and attitudes do count. God does care, and accountability is part of any relationship, especially a covenantal relationship. A covenant means hanging in there and reconciling and beginning again, and again, and again.

That is why Isaiah's words belong in the genre of a love song. It is why in the gospel more is at stake than a grape harvest. God is investing in us as a people just as we invest our very lifeblood in our children and partners. These are the hardest jobs on the planet. They disappoint but promise new life.

We can learn faithfulness to those we love and to all we have planted from God's faithfulness. We owe God gratitude and partnership in our world.

● Where do you invest despite disappointment?

PRAY

LEADER: Let us imagine our patches of vineyard and ask ourselves: What more can I do? What must I put in God's hands? *Pause.*

LEADER: Dismiss all anxiety from your minds.

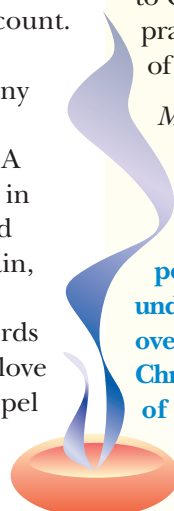
ALL: Care for this vine your right hand has planted.

LEADER: Present your needs to God in every form of prayer and in petitions full of gratitude.

Mention people or concerns you wish to place in God's hands.

ALL: May God's own peace, which is beyond understanding, stand guard over our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, the cornerstone of our community. Amen.

Bless and share the cup of wine or juice.



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