

Psalm 118: 21-25, 29 ~ Matthew 21:33-46

What Fruits Are We Producing?

18th Sunday after Pentecost ~ World Communion ~ Peace and Global Witness Special Offering

October 4, 2020 ~ Communion Meditation

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Introduction to Scripture Lesson

Here we are, still in Jerusalem with Jesus inside the temple. It is still Monday of Holy Week. You may recall he was teaching the people and had been interrupted by the leaders with this question, "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?" Today we take up the second of the three stories, the three parables Jesus told them as his answer. And he's cranking it up a notch. Last week's parable was about people believing or not believing in John the Baptist. Today's it's a story about respecting Jesus or not.

Meditation

A young girl was working so diligently on her homework, that her father became curious and asked her what she was doing. "I'm writing a report on the condition of the world and how to bring world peace," she replied. "Isn't that a pretty tall order for a young girl?" her father asked. "Oh no," she answered. "And don't worry, there are *three* of us in the class working on it!"

Today, it certainly seems like a tall order when we consider the condition of our country and our world shaken to its core by the coronavirus pandemic that has now taken more than one million souls all across the globe, and infected over 34.6 million people, now including our own President, First Lady, and other Whitehouse staff, for whom we pray, along with all who are fighting this awful virus. This pathogen that respects no border or boundary wreaks damage and havoc in every quarter, but especially and most virulently on the "least of these."

Today, it seems like a tall order as we slog through another week of a contentious presidential election season unlike any we have experienced in our lives, I think we definitely need more than three children working on the project of how-to bring peace to this world. As this year of 2020 marches on, surely our yearning for peace: for peace within our souls and for peace between our polarized and fractured body politic, continues to grow beyond the telling.

There is Good News for us in this second of Jesus' three parables of judgment. After the week we've had, we need some good news and quickly, so here it is. Our deep yearning for peace, our thirst for God, our hope for justice, doesn't even come close to God's relentless search for us. God's longing for us to hear God's voice in our hearts and be changed into instruments of peace; into bearers of God's mercy and righteousness. We find this truth throughout our whole Bible. This parable offers yet another variation, albeit a bloody, violent one, on this through-line, this theme. Did you notice how the Landowner in this story keeps trying to get those tenants to do right by his beautiful and complete vineyard?

The vineyard was set up for success: complete with fence, winepress, and watchtower. This vineyard has all it needs. The problem in this parable is *not* the vineyard. The problem is its tenants who have no respect, no regard for their landowner, no understanding of their role as tenants, or for whom they were tending the vineyard. By the end of the story, Jesus actually shifts to calling the landowner, “Lord” or *Kyrios* in the Greek, just to make sure all who hear this story get the point. It doesn’t matter to the tenants. They keep killing off whomever the Lord sends. Up to and including his son. They would do anything to become owners themselves: a law in place at the time, which could have made this transfer of the land to them plausible.

Since the Book of Genesis, since Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, since Cain killed his brother Abel—God keeps testing us. And expecting better of us. God does not give up. Instead God keeps sending prophets—some even interpret the two sets of slaves the Landowner sends in this story to stand for the major and minor prophets of the Hebrew Bible. And then, as the parable and the story of Jesus’ life goes: finally, the Landowner sent his son, whom surely the tenants would respect. But they did not. Not in the parable. Before we stand in judgment of those wicked and clueless tenants, the parable calls us to ask the harder question: Do we? Jesus parables were meant to disturb, provoke, inspire, and entertain us.ⁱ

It is a gross misinterpretation to distance ourselves from those tenants, or to interpret this as a story about the superiority, or supersession of Christianity over Judaism. I want to be clear and make sure we get this right: Jesus is telling this story to the leadership of his own people. He is drawing from their shared sources of truth: Isaiah and the Psalms. With this parable and this whole confrontation, he is addressing a crisis of leadership within his own fold. This parable is a story told by one Jew to other Jews. About fifty years or so later, When Matthew wrote his gospel his audience was also Jewish, what were understood as Jewish Christians at that point. Christianity as a religion had not yet begun.

The conflict in this story, is an internal one between believers. By the time Matthew was written, after 70 CE, the temple had recently been destroyed before their very eyes, and the institution as they knew it was in tatters. Talk of stones, cornerstones, and crumbling structures touched on trauma that was real and present. There is judgment here, but it is not between Jews and Christians. It is Jews trying to make sense of God’s message to them in the face of this devastation. At its core, Jesus judgments was between those who are following God’s call for justice and righteousness and those who were not. Those who were actually producing the fruits of the kingdom and those who for all their religiosity, were not.

The prophet Isaiah put it like this: “he expected justice, but saw blood; righteousness but heard a cry.” (Isaiah 5:7b) God expects better. God is still searching, longing for us to get it right. God is still expecting justice. And what is God seeing in us? I hear Jesus calling then and now for prophetic, fearless leadership. I hear Jesus calling for vision and for boots on the ground that line up with God’s yearning from the dawn of creation. And he means business. There is definitely an edge to this story that we if we attempt to mute it, domesticate it, or divert it, will miss the point, that Matthew makes plain: “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.”

Again and again, especially in Matthew we hear this call to action over and above the systems and structures designed to house and maintain, in our case, the church. If our institutions do not serve God's purpose of justice and righteousness, they need to be changed. For Jesus and Matthews: It's all about the fruit. And Matthew makes it easy for us, by forcing us to ask this question: "What fruits are we producing?" We still have time, my friends. How long, I do not know. But I do know that God is here longing for our response. We have an assignment, from our teacher in heaven. And yes, it is a very tall order.

The fruit of peace is Jesus' gift. We hear it when the risen Christ enters the room where his disciples are locked up: "Peace be with you." (John 20:19-23) Jesus breathes forgiveness and the power to forgive, the power to be peace makers into them. And all of his disciples ever since. The peace of Jesus, the peace the world cannot give, depends on each of us and all of us.

As you come to the Table today, I hear Jesus asking each of us: Did you make any peace today? Did you make a place at the Table for anyone today? Or were you more concerned that it was set correctly? Did you open your heart to someone that others reject? Did you take a stand for justice? Or did you stay silent? Jesus invites us to his Table. Here the longing of God and the longings of our heart can meet in the bread and wine.

What fruits are we producing? That is the question and the invitation. We don't have forever. This is our chance.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (HarperCollins: New York, NY, 2014), pp. 296-305.