

Sermon by Rev Dr. Judith McDaniel on 10/08/17

Isaiah 5: 1-7

Mt. 21:33-43

Several years ago a movie came out entitled "A Walk in the Clouds." The Clouds was the name of a vineyard, a vineyard with roots in the earliest settlements of California and the family that cared for it. But the movie wasn't simply about a family's reverence for its heritage. It was about love. Romantic love, surely; but more deeply about the love of a Father for his children. I was reminded of that theme when I read the opening words of our lessons for today: "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard."

This morning's Gospel reading is the third of the vineyard parables given us by the author of Matthew, all three coming just after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, an entry we celebrate on Palm Sunday. As he tells these three parables, Jesus is teaching in the temple precincts stirring the chief priests and the elders to question his authority and leading ultimately to his crucifixion. The stories of the three parables build in a crescendo, transitioning like a cold, damp breath between Fall and Winter, between dying and death.

The third of these vineyard parables is the only one of the three in which the authors of Mark and Luke share. The authors of Matthew, Mark, and Luke each end the account of a vineyard whose tenants murder the messengers sent to them with an apocalyptic climax, a quote from Psalm 118: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." Then the authors of Matthew and Luke add, "The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

In these words the audience for Jesus' declaration of Psalm 118 would have heard echoes of the prophecies of Daniel [2:34-35] describing the downfall of Neo-Babylonian, Median, Persian, and Greek empires. All these empires of earth collapse and are replaced by a new kingdom founded by God. In Daniel, the only apocalyptic book of the Old Testament, a stone untouched by human hand breaks away from a human monument and grows into a great mountain, filling the whole earth. Against the depiction of devastating history is placed a vision of God's benevolent will for the future.

The people of Israel were well acquainted with Isaiah's proclamation of God's love by means of the metaphor of planting a vineyard, and they knew the requirements of viniculture as well: planting on the slopes of hills which are less suitable for the cultivation of cereals, clearing the ground of obstacles and terracing it, securing the vineyard against predatory animals by an enclosing wall or hedge, hewing a vat in the rock of the vineyard itself, and building a watchtower for additional protection. The owner of the vineyard does all that before handing it to the people to be cultivated. But this particular allegory in Matthew, Mark, and Luke signals a deeper significance to the privileges entrusted to a people. It tells of ultimate, decisive destiny for a culture that has no vision; and the build-up to this climactic episode begins with the first of Jesus' vineyard parables:

The first of the vineyard parables centers on justice, God's justice for the laborers in the vineyard whether they worked all day or only an hour. The owner of the vineyard says, "Whatever is just, I will give you." Webster's dictionary defines justice as the principle of rectitude and integrity, that which is equitable, impartial, merited and righteous. In Hebrew to be righteous means literally to be in right standing or to be right with. In the printer's trade, or on your computer, the word "justify" is used in exactly that same way: To justify means to set type in full lines of equal length, flush both right and left. The printed lines are placed in right relationship with the edges of the page and with each other. The identity of one line is fixed in relation to the position of another. So too righteousness and justice mean right relationship. Divine justice means to be in right relationship with God. Justice is a

relationship of balance satisfactory to both God and man. And that relationship is effected by God Himself. He sets us in right relationship, not because of who we are but because of who He is, not by means of what we have done but what He has done, not by merit but by grace. Whatever is just, He will give us.

The second of the vineyard parables reminds me of the graffiti on a roadside sign along one of our interstate highways. The religious billboard contained two words: "TRY GOD"; the graffiti beneath it, three words: "ON WHAT CHARGE?" That is exactly what's going on as Jesus tells the parable of the two sons who were asked by their father to work in the vineyard. Jesus is being tried in the hearts and minds of His audience. But Jesus effects a reversal. He turns the chief priests and the Pharisees into the defendants, and they convict themselves. He invites the priests, elders, scribes, and Pharisees to convict the second son who had quickly said he would go but ultimately did not do the will of his father. He forces His audience to give the obvious answer and implies they are like that second Son. Then He equates those considered religiously impure with the first son who repents his hasty answer, turns himself around, and does his father's will. Jesus was to be crucified for just such words and the actions linked with them. He associated with social and religious outcasts. He shared table companionship with despised people and was host to the openly immoral. So when He told the self-righteous and powerful that these religiously impure people would enter the kingdom of God before them, the religiously exclusive condemned Him. For the Pharisaic interpretation of the law looked for salvation in a check-list of actions. Fulfilling a list of "do's and don'ts," they no longer recognized their need for God's forgiveness; and any action or person who did not fit into their literal fundamentalism stood outside the pale. The Pharisees, priests, elders, and scribes had taken the law to heart. They were confident that the words handed down to them were the whole truth, confident in their traditions, self-confident. They were unavailable to new insight, lacking---as Shakespeare said---"a peace above all earthly dignities: A still and quiet conscience."

Immediately comes the third vineyard parable, a story of faithlessness and judgment. A vine is planted and tended; and finally in the third year it bears fruit. But it is not until the fifth year that a harvest becomes the possession of the owner. Even the tenants know that the fruit of the fifth year is the rightful share of the owner. It is due him. He asks only for some of the fruit from the vineyard. The owner has provided the circumstances for growth and given the tenants the freedom and responsibility to develop it, for he leased them the property. The only return he asks is a portion of the fruit, his share of attention.

It is a simple story of a single message repeatedly dismissed. Left to freely tend the vineyard, the tenants set for themselves a goal of total consumption, selfishness, self-absorption and concentration of every benefit to themselves. They lose their perspective on their relationship to the owner of the vineyard. They forget the point of their enterprise. They forget the point of the planting of the vineyard in the first place---to yield, with justice and righteousness, for themselves and the creator. Because their goal is out of focus, the fruit the vineyard yielded was not justice and integrity but violence and outrage; and now judgment is upon them.

Three parables: One whose conclusion is justice brought about by grace. A second which exposes a counterfeit conscience and mercy for repentance. A third which demands the ultimate in forgiveness, a life given in love for the salvation of all people. How can we make sense of these allegories in our own day?

This last July an international scientific conference was held in, of all places, Pasco, Washington. The conference was convened to seek solutions to the mysteries of the Shroud of Turin, the linen burial wrapping of a crucified man whose image was seen for the first time when photographed in 1898. This image becomes positive in a photographic negative.

It cannot be seen otherwise. You may remember that in 1988 a sample was cut from the most contaminated, damaged, and repaired corner edge of the Shroud for carbon dating. This sample was given a date of 1260-1390, so headlines proclaimed the entire Shroud to be a medieval forgery. But the 1988 C-14 dating was not only scientifically but politically corrupt in its conclusions. Simply put, protocols were not followed. Investigations continue.

Presenters at the Pasco conference included 3 Italian Ph.D. professors in physics; one in plant reproductive systems and population genetics; 2 Spanish Ph.D.s, one in physics and the other in Biology; an Australian Ph.D. in biophotonics; a Ph.D. in computer science from Canada; nuclear engineers, medical doctors, attorneys, the list of credentialed scientific presenters from all over the world is long. It was demonstrated that the image on the Shroud affects less than 1 % of the micro fibers, 1 to 2 micro fibers deep, in the Palestinian herringbone twill, a fabric not found in medieval Europe. Even more startling, there is no image underneath the blood found on the cloth. Analyses ranged from pollen samples to radiation to sub-atomic quarks to historical writings and art. I got lost at quarks and one hydrogen strangelet per molecule. But I was not lost when historical evidence was presented.

Among the most compelling pieces of evidence are ecclesiastical histories and numerous pieces of art including two accounts---one by Eusebius of Caesarea who in his *Ecclesiastical History* of 300 AD mentions the healing of King Abgar of Edessa and the other by Evagrius Scholasticus in 593 who mentions a miraculous imprint of the face of Jesus upon a cloth found in Edessa; several icons of King Abgar of Edessa receiving a cloth with an image of Christ not made by human hands; two coins minted in 692 by Emperor Justinian II, the first ever minted with an image of Christ, which show 180 matching points of congruence between the Shroud image and the coin image; two panels of a 10<sup>th</sup> century triptych now residing at St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai desert which depicts the presentation of a cloth with the image of Christ to King Abgar of Edessa; and, finally the Hungarian Pray Codex dating from 1192 which not only shows the body but also the unique 3 to 1 herringbone pattern weave of the Shroud with five existing burn holes. The general conclusion was that radiation was emitted from the body, carrying the energy from within the body because of the bones seen on the Shroud. It may be that the image is a radiation burn made by charged particles creating a static/corona discharge from the top fibers and/or by ultraviolet light. In other words, the image on the burial shroud of this man was made by a brief burst of energy, not by human hands.

Do we make sense of things in our own day by analysis or experience? What we have are two ways of finding truth: On the one hand we have a 14 ½ foot strip of cloth, the most studied object in history, which over 115 years of analysis has only yielded more questions. On the other we have grace, mercy, and forgiveness accepted only by faith. Are they either/or choices or both/and?

Jesus is not asking us for a new fashion of life, but for a new foundation for existence. He is asking us to take a new stance toward life, to stand at the decision-making point of conviction and reason and principle to discover and relate to all that is good, painstakingly sifting good from bad, bit by bit, differentiating between them to integrate the one and refuse the other, putting them in right relation, setting in order the opposites within ourselves and in the world without. To serve the good in one another, to hold to the good wherever it is to be found, in small measure or large, is---in theological terms---to be obedient. To find, to nourish, to offer every good gift---our capabilities, our convictions, our understandings, is to be a disciple, to be available to serve the last and most ultimate of goods.

We take the risks of availability, sensitivity, accountability because the authority of God is borne by an obedient servant, one who acted on the basis of offering rather than taking, of giving rather than receiving, of using...spending...pouring out this life to receive life everlasting.

So try God; serve the good; and the love song of our God will always be with you.

(The Rev.) Judith M. McDaniel, Ph.D.