

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 5, 2014
The Rev. Elizabeth A.B. Tesi

If you are my Facebook friend (you can send me a friend request if you aren't yet!) or if you have spent time around me in the last few weeks, you might be aware that we had rather a crisis at my house these last few weeks. I am most definitely not a cat person. I swear, I'm really not. But we have two cats, Snowbeast and Origami. Several weeks ago, Origami fell sick. He had a cat UTI and ended up admitted to the vet hospital (UTIs can be fatal to cats very quickly). Origami is part of a bonded pair, and his brother, Snowbeast was very upset and confused when his brother cat went away in the carrier. I will not actually admit that I might have slept on the couch one night, cradling a Snowbeast who was too upset to come to the bedroom to sleep like a normal cat. But the truth is that my husband loves those cats to the ends of the world. And even if I'm not really a cat person myself, the kitties are precious to me because they are precious to my husband, and because they have brains the size of furry walnuts and they lack any form of street sense and survival skills, and they need me to keep them alive.

(At 9AM) It's St. Francis Day, and many of you might be joining us for the Blessing of the Animals, so you well understand how something can be precious, and how you might be a good steward of that something because it is precious to another.

In our animals, we can understand the energy that goes into caring for something precious to another. When I hire a cat sitter or take my cat to the vet, I trust that the sitter or the vet will care for the animal as if he were his own. If they did not, I would have felt betrayed. And I can't imagine greater pain than that of betrayal. If something is beloved to someone we care about, we make sacrifices to protect the beloved possession of our loved ones. We understand how our loved one could feel betrayed or grieved if we did not care for their precious possession. We take good care of the precious item because we want our loved one to trust us.

That is what our gospel story is really about today. St. Francis had not yet come along, and ancient Israelites were not into cute fluffy kittens or dogs. So our writers needed a trope—some way to talk about taking care of something that is precious to another. Most people could have understood that land, especially a source of food and income like a vineyard, was precious and that it needed care.

The Isaiah reading can help us understand how precious vineyards were: it's a love song—to a beloved about his vineyard. And it can also help us understand why we would give special care to something precious to our beloved. Granted, it's kind of a Taylor Swift style love song—it starts out all good with the love and then veers off into a breakup song. We expected one thing of the vineyard, and instead it gives wild grapes—sour, small, unsuitable for eating or wine. But now that we know that vineyards, and land, and produce, are so precious to people that they write love songs about them, perhaps that can help us understand the Gospel better.

The Gospel is so packed that we are going to focus on just the first layer of it today. A landowner builds a vineyard, fortifies it, and leaves it in the care of tenants. I don't know why the landowner has left the vineyard behind. I also don't know what the lease terms were, and I was not able to find out much about middle eastern ownership laws and squatter's rights which may have been a factor in today's dispute. I know only that the landowner bought this land and planted it. I know that in Isaiah, the landowner loved his vineyard and it was precious. I know that in the Psalm, the psalmist asks God to preserve the vine he has planted. I think it is reasonable to consider that, to the landowner, the vineyard was precious, and he hired tenants to care for it accordingly.

If we consider the subsequent actions in the light of betrayal trauma, it follows the expected psychological course. The initial trauma occurs: the tenants renege on their lease and beat and kill the landlord's slaves. The landlord clearly can't comprehend this, so in anger or fear or retaliation, he sends more slaves. They beat and kill more slaves. The landlord, being so certain that they must see his viewpoint and accept how precious this is, sends his son, who is killed promptly. The landlord reacts with a scorched earth response.

Jesus explains that this means that the work of God's kingdom does not rest solely with those who seemed to have been chosen, but that the work might be given to those who have the heart to care for those things which are precious to God. I will agree that the reading is terribly violent so let's work to remember that this is a parable. This is not a model of how God's people should react in the face of injustice. Jesus is not saying that our Christian M.O. should be violence—to hurt and kill those who we deem to be acting counter to God's plan. Jesus is a dramatic storyteller. Rather, this story is about recognizing that something is precious to our beloved, and about the behavior we undertake when something is precious to someone we love, and someone who trusts us. I know how to take care of Snowbeast and Origami because they are precious to Martin. You know how to care for an item precious to another. That is the work we are given to do: this world, and all God's people within it, are precious to God. We are called to be good tenants, and dare I say, good stewards of this world.

This Sunday in October, we kick off our Stewardship campaign with the theme of Reach! Truly I tell you, I promise I did not look ahead and pick a Sunday when the readings lined up with Stewardship. Because I would not have willingly chosen this reading. "Do what God tells you or we all die horribly." Not exactly the fuzzy, kind, Jesus I'd choose for a stewardship kickoff. And this year, we have a very ambitious goal. Our most full vision for the Church of the Holy Cross involves a budget of \$520,000, and our pledgers compromise 80% of our budget. We are reaching for a balanced budget this year, and that leaves us with a huge ask to do. And yes, that's risky. Some of you might be furious that the priest would dare speak of money from the pulpit. Some of you might be shocked that this church spends so much, because \$520,000 is a lot of money! Some of you might wonder why we should bother to give, because so much of the money seems to be tied up in salaries and building costs. Some of you might be hedging your pledging bets and wishing you could wait for the new Rector. In the coming week, you will get the stewardship packet. Please read it. We tell a good story.

But perhaps the easiest answer to the story is the simplest. This world, these people living in, here, in Africa, all over the world, this creation down to the smallest atom, is beloved to God. If we want to claim that we are God's people, the easiest way to begin that journey is by being good stewards of this vineyard: stewards of this environment, caretakers of each other and especially of the poor and the sick and those suffering here and far away, and stewards of those places that help us achieve that work.

This church of Holy Cross is a place where we nurture and train God's people to serve in many ways to the precious vineyard that is our world. We nurture and cultivate a valuable fruit here: we soothe and fill souls in worship, and we create space and opportunity to send care out into a hurting world to God's beloved people. That is the beauty of being a church. No one else out there is going to tell the story of a God who loves. No one else out there is going to see the humanity of all God's people and to tell the story that they are beloved to the Great Almighty, Invisible, God Three in One. That is the work of the church. There are other agencies that give out food or that go to Africa to provide medical care, or where you can play golf together and enjoy fellowship, but we the Church are the only place in the world where we value the God spark within every last one of you and proclaim God's love incarnate. That is the work we are called to reach out, and to do.

This is God's world, and God's church and it is a precious in God's sight.