

18th Sunday after Pentecost
October 4, 2020
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Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring, VA

Readings for Proper 22A
Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80:7-14
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 21:33-46

He's Talking About You

In the HBO television series *Game of Thrones*, Tyrion Lannister and his mercenary bodyguard Bronn are walking through the streets of the capital. They happen upon a street preacher of sorts, who condemns the king and royal family, Tyrion's family, in a fiery rant.

"It's hard to argue with his assessment," Tyrion jokes.

The man continues, "A dancing king, prancing down his bloodstained halls to the tune of a twisted demon monkey."

The crowd laughs in their agreement.

"You have to admire his imagination," Tyrion says.

"He's talking about you," Bronn replies, letting him in on what the people really think.

He's talking about you.

Scripture speaks to us. Our prayer book says in its Catechism, "We call [the Scriptures] the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible." God is talking about us in there, though we may miss the message, ignore it, or wish it away. The reason we keep telling these stories is they're talking about us.

Jesus' "parable of the wicked tenants," as it's called, is a terrible lesson. And it's about us. Jesus speaks to us today of a beautiful vineyard, God's creation, tended by the petty, the murderous, and the corrupt. When God sends his servants, the prophets, to assist in the harvest of righteousness, the people of God reject their message and their assistance. The tenants beat and kill the servants. When God sends yet more servants, the tenants kill them, too. When God sends his own Son, Jesus Christ, the tenants cast him out and kill him to take the vineyard for themselves. "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" Jesus asks. The reply comes: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

And that's our Gospel. Good morning! And have a lovely week!

This is the Good News:

When God speaks of wickedness, of pettiness, cruelty, murder, and corruption, he's talking about me. He's talking about you.

When God speaks of an owner's return and the coming judgment, he's talking about me. He's talking about you.

When God speaks of a miserable death and leasing the kingdom to others, he's talking about me. He's talking about you.

And it is Good News. Let me explain.

Jesus' parable practice and his vineyard metaphor have deep roots in the Scriptures.

The prophet Nathan uses this parabolic strategy against King David in the second book of Samuel. Nathan sets a rhetorical trap for the king and tells a simple but pointed story about an injustice, which David immediately condemns. Nathan simply springs the trap by pointing out that the story was about David himself: I'm talking about you. And David, voila, has condemned himself.

He is talking about you.

Isaiah does much the same here in chapter 5. Isaiah begins with a story of a vineyard. God's beloved, we're told, has built a vineyard. He prepared the land, developed it, tended it, and he has been disappointed. He expected anabim grapes, and he gets beushim wild grapes. That's not quite right there: the word literally means stinking things. God expects grapes, and he gets stinking, worthless fruit, wild grapes, stink-berries, poison-berries.

God asks, "And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard." God effectively asks his audience: What am I supposed to do? And the implied judgment from the reader is, well, I guess, you plow it under and start over. God replies that's what I am doing and makes his metaphor plain. I'm talking about you, says the prophet: "For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!"

It is an amazing play on words here that's missed in English. Every preacher must by canon law point it out in sermons that are even tangentially related. God expects mishpat and instead gets mishpach; he expects justice and gets bloodshed or blight. God expects tsedaqah and instead gets tse'aqah; he expects righteousness and hears only cries, screams, wretchedness, inequity. The hoped-for grapes are poison.

He's talking about you. Look around. Is this what God intends? Petty squabbles, war, and violence? 200,000 dead in the United States, a million sick, now including our own nation's president, his family, and political leaders? A church displaced, distressed, disillusioned? Judgment is coming; it is, in fact, here. We pray with Psalm 80, "Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; behold and tend this vine; preserve what your right hand has planted."

But notice: Where is the judgment coming from? Who said the vineyard had to be scrapped? We did. God asks for a verdict in verses 3-4, and the sentence, so to speak, comes in 5-6. The guilty verdict itself is never spoken; it proceeds naturally, logically from our notions of what one ought to do when one's expectations are not met. We are catching ourselves. God wanted fruit, righteous conduct. He doesn't get it. He ought to punish and get the fruit he required. But that's our economy; that's our politics. Not God's. His thoughts are not your thoughts.

He is talking about you, but not quite the way you might think.

Jesus extends Nathan's strategy and Isaiah's metaphor. Everyone should have known this the minute Jesus opened his mouth about a vineyard: "Uh oh, he's talking about us—that's Isaiah." Jesus explains that the vineyard is built and developed, but then the vineyard owner puts some

people in charge and leaves. “Oh, good,” everyone breathes a sigh of relief, “Isaiah didn’t have tenants—we’re good.”

Not quite. The landowner is understood as God, the vineyard as Israel, the tenants are the Israelite leaders who rejected the prophets of old and now reject Jesus, and those who believe in Christ will replace them after those who reject the Christ are consigned to a miserable death, yada yada yada—oh, they get it: “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.”

Jesus speaks of us, too. He came to free us and found us clinging to privilege, to any last advantage that might give us a leg up on our neighbors. He came to ransom us and found us bound, exploited, stressed, without the resources or respect to stand in dignity. He came for peace and found riots. He came to heal and give life, and we told him it was God’s will and our right not to wear a mask.

He’s talking about you. Judgment is coming; it is, in fact, here.

But notice: Where is the judgment coming from? Who said the wicked tenants had to die a “miserable death?” *The crowd did.* Their condemnation comes from their notions of what one does when one’s expectation are not met—punish the guilty. We are catching ourselves here. If we feel like we’re losing the kingdom, whose fault is that? The fault of others who have sinned and brought God’s judgment on themselves and us? No, if we feel like we’re losing our grip on God, reach out and grab his hand. Because it’s there for you. We must take responsibility for our actions, to be sure, and we will endure their consequences, certainly, but don’t think for a minute that this is a tale of a vengeful God.

What kind of vengeful God does not punish sinful people with fire but instead sends assistance to them?

What kind of vengeful God would send still more servants to those already proven to be murderous? What kind of servant would knowingly face death for the sake of others at the will of their master?

What kind of vengeful God would send his own son into such circumstances? What kind of son would go?

Matthew tells us Jesus came “not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

That “many?” He’s talking about you.

You may feel disconnected in this time, displaced, distressed, disillusioned. We feel like we’re losing the kingdom, and we may hear in Jesus’ parable that God is talking about us. But we catch ourselves. God is not condemning us. Our behavior disappoints, to be sure, and for that we must take responsibility and accept the consequences, yes, but make no mistake: God never stops loving us.

He is talking about you, but not quite the way you think.

In this vineyard, in this awe-inspiring creation for which we give thanks, in this mysterious kingdom barely dreamt, much less achieved, God will never stop sending people to assist and save you. God never sleeps on you, never abandons you, never surrenders you.

God sent his son for you. To help you. To free you. To love you.

God is here with us. He speaks to us. He loves us.

So return and share that love. Love God and love neighbor in return.

Because this is the Good News:

When God speaks of wickedness, of pettiness, cruelty, murder, and corruption, he is talking about you.

When God speaks of an owner's return and the coming judgment, yes, he's talking about you.

When God speaks of a miserable death, he is indeed talking about you.

Because when God speaks of forgiving that wickedness, he's talking about you.

When God speaks of true justice finally, finally appearing for God's people, he's talking about you.

When God speaks of resurrection, even in the face of that miserable death, he's talking about you.

Brothers and sisters, when our Lord says, "my beloved," he's talking about you.

And that is very Good News.