

Sunday October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
Thanksgiving Sunday

**PRAYER:** O God, you plant and tend your vineyard. Nothing could be done for it that you do not do. Yet when you come to pluck ripe, plump grapes from the vines, you find only wild grapes. Though you plant choice vines in choice land, they seldom yield good fruit.

Keeper of the harvest, do not trample the vineyard and lay it waste. Plant us once again; tend us lovingly; continue to look for good fruit, and we will not disappoint you.

**STEWARDSHIP:** “If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deeds and in truth.” (1 John 3:17-18)

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** Wondrously, creative God, we marvel at your handiwork all around us. The sights, the sounds, the smells: all seem absolutely endless, especially at this time of year as we mark the time of harvest. How can we be anything but thankful? What is also true, O God, is our need to be a thankful people. How overly tempting it is to think we as individuals, or even collectively, are responsible for the flow of bounty and goodness. We may have tilled the ground, and planted the seed, but you made the rain, and the sun, and soil that makes all things grow.

We need to be a thankful people, dear God, because of the temptation before us to think we are somehow separate from the rest of creation. That what happens to the water, air, and soil has little impact on us. But we are seeing more and more that this isn’t true. From issues of global warming causing terrible storms and drought, to water and air poisoned and causing disease, we are intimately connected to the planet. There is nowhere else for us to go.

So, forgive us, O God, for neglecting our work as stewards of your creation. For shirking even the simplest things we can do to: preserve, protect, and enhance the part of the world in which we live. How rare it is to experience any kind of pristine wilderness, let alone a trash free park or road side. We thank you for those brave scientists, and environmentalists who try to speak prophetically to our abuse and neglect of our planet. We may not always approve of their methods, but their message is usually right on.

It saddens us to learn of entire species in danger of going extinct, and we beseech you to compel our political leaders to take the necessary steps to preserve, protect, and enhance fragile ecosystems. We need a responsible balance between economics, and responsible stewardship, and we fear we are unable to find that balance. But you can lead us back to where we need to be.

We are also thankful today, O God, for your creation of people. Without relationships, life would have no meaning. As we learn to love each other, we discover more and more of what it means to love you. In knowing each other, we know you. So, along with preserving the water, soil, and air; and the many animals around us, we pray that we might also preserve each other. That we work hard to bring opportunities for those around us to dwell in abundant living.

Help us not to pollute someone else’s life with the toxicity of prejudice, indifference, and judgment. Instead, help us to sow: generosity, mercy, and grace into every life we encounter.

With this in mind, O God, we are heartbroken at the violence we have seen both here at home in Edmonton and in Las Vegas. We just cannot fathom what would compel

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someone to take the lives of people who they do not even know to further a political, or religious agenda, or maybe even out of mental illness. For those people traumatized by these acts of evil we ask you to comfort, and heal. For those families grieving the loss of loved ones we pray your peace. And for law makers on both sides of the border we pray for wisdom to take the steps necessary to end the violence.

We also ask, O God that we become a people of peace. That we play no part in building walls between our neighbours and families.

**BENEDICTION:** God into the world as God's distinctive people. Love in all sincerity, serve the Lord with unflagging energy; stand firm in time of trouble, persist in prayer and practice hospitality. Contribute to the needs of God's people, offer blessings upon those who persecute you and care as much about each other as you do about yourselves. And may God's spirit grant you the power to fulfill this commission to the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Matthew 21:33-46

“Whose Vineyard, is it?”

There was a man who was thoroughly depressed and at the end of his rope. His life had become unbearable, mostly because he felt bullied by his wife. In the old days, we might use the word “henpecked” to describe how he felt. His self-esteem was nonexistent, he dreaded being at home and to try and cope, he visited a psychologist to learn how to assert himself. The psychologist told him, “You do not have to accept your wife’s bullying. You need to go home right now and let her know you are your own boss.

The man was encouraged by his doctor’s advice so he hurried home, burst in, and for dramatic effect slammed the door behind him. He got right in his wife’s face and shouted, “From now on you’ll do what I say, woman! Go get my supper, then go upstairs and lay out my clothes. After I eat, I’m going out with the boys. You can stay here where you belong. By the way, do you know who is going to tie my tie for me?” “I sure do”, said his wife calmly. “The undertaker.” (1002 Humorous Illustrations, p. 76)

I don’t know about you, but I would never have attempted such an action with anyone, no matter how I was feeling. Primarily, because if there is one thing in this world I work hard to avoid, it is confrontation. I would rather avoid someone I find difficult, than deal with them directly. Which is one of the reasons I am in awe of Jesus, because I have noticed that he never avoided confrontation, even when it cost him his life.

Today we read that Jesus said to them “Listen to another parable”. That sounds like a simple enough invitation, but it wasn’t. Jesus could easily have said, “Get ready for another confrontation between the Pharisees and me.” The parable was intentionally provocative, and the point was clear. Regardless of what you think about the Pharisees, you’ve got to give them some credit today. They got it. They understood the parable.

They heard Jesus. The bible says, “They realized he was talking about them.” Jesus held before them a truth they didn’t like, and they wanted to put a stop to it. They wanted to arrest him. This is neither Jesus’ first, nor his last confrontation with the Pharisees. As I mentioned, most of us tend to avoid those with whom we have conflict and confrontation. But not Jesus. He just keeps on coming.

At every turn, he is: offending, aggravating, and confronting the Pharisees. It’s like Jesus enjoys “poking the bear”. Jesus eats with the wrong people. He won’t answer their questions. He taunts them by breaking the law, and healing on the Sabbath. He calls them hypocrites and blind leaders. He escapes their traps. He leaves them speechless. He rattles off a string of “woes” against them. And last week we saw how he compared them to a disobedient son who will not work in the vineyard.

They just can’t catch a break with Jesus. He never lets up. Considering this, have you ever asked yourself why? Why does Jesus seem to deliberately provoke them? Why can’t he just let go of them?

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And as a segue, maybe we need to ask, what does that have to do with us? Is Jesus going around looking for a fight? There are people who love confrontation. I suspect President Trump is like that. But is it Jesus' modes operandi? I don't think so.

Maybe the question should be; is Jesus' primary motivation, in his angry encounters, designed to expose and condemn those who do not follow him? That's why some people we know confront others; to condemn them or judge them. But again, that does not seem to fit with what we know about Jesus. After all, he was so welcoming and kind to others, like Zacchaeus and woman caught in adultery.

Well maybe Jesus is concerned about keeping score, and naming all the attitudes and behaviors of the Pharisees that he considers wrong? A spiritual ledger if you will. Again, that is not like Jesus. So, perhaps, and this is a bit scary; we can wonder if Jesus is trying to exclude from the kingdom of God the religious leaders of his day? Communicating that they, despite their religion, are outside God's grace. I don't think so.

Here is what I think these confrontations are about, and why Jesus is so assertive. It comes down to the fact that Jesus is unwilling to give up on the Pharisees. Jesus loves them so much, he wants them inside the Kingdom. It is so easy for us to dismiss people as irredeemable for God, but not Jesus. No one is unworthy of Jesus' effort to guide them back to God. Not Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes or anyone else for that matter.

Furthermore, Jesus is unwilling to give up on you or me. He just keeps on coming. No wonder Francis Thompson wrote "*The Hound of Heaven*". That is the good news, hope, and joy in today's parable. This is not so much a parable of exclusion, or condemnation, as it is a parable of Jesus' unwillingness to give up. He loves us too much to walk away from us, whatever it is that we try to use to keep him at bay.

His unwillingness to give up on us, often confronts us with truth about our lives that is almost always difficult to hear and accept. We might hear his words, but do we realize he is talking about us? This parable, and the confrontation this parable provokes, are like a mirror held before us, so that we might see and recognize in ourselves what Jesus sees and recognizes. This is not to condemn us, but to recover us from the places of our self-exclusion, to call us back to life, and to lead us home.

Now here is one of the deepest truths about God we can ever hear. Jesus doesn't exclude us, or anyone else from the kingdom of God because, (are you ready for this) he doesn't have to. Why? We simply exclude ourselves, and we're pretty good at it. In the passage today, we learn that that's what the Pharisees have done. In their religious exploits, and attention to law and traditions, which they thought brought them closer to God, the Pharisees have actually excluded themselves.

"The kingdom of God will be taken away from you," Jesus says to them. This is not so much a punishment for failing to produce kingdom fruits. It is, rather, the recognition of what already is.

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They were given the vineyard, and failed to produce, and share the fruits of the kingdom. Jesus is just naming the reality, the truth. They have excluded themselves. In the same way, the kingdom of God will be given to those who are already producing kingdom fruit. This is not a reward, but a recognition of what already is. Where the fruit is, there also is the kingdom.

And fruit is the whole point. In farming and gardening, all the effort and resources are used to grow fruit. Go over this afternoon, or tomorrow, to the Norfolk County Fair and take a look at the competitions for produce. What matters is the produce. I have yet to see a ribbon given out for best effort in seeding, or application of fertilizer. No one cares how hard you hoed. All anyone is interested in is the fruit. It's the same in the Kingdom of God. Fruit matters.

If you want to know what the fruits of the kingdom look like, then look at the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ. What fruit do you see? Love, intimacy, mercy, and forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, presence, wisdom, truth, healing, reconciliation, self-surrender, joy, thanksgiving, peace, obedience, humility. I'm not talking about these things as abstract ideas, but as lived realities in the vineyards of our lives.

Whether we like it or not, we have all been given vineyards. They are the people, relationships, circumstances, and events of our lives that God has entrusted to our care. That means our: spouse and marriage, children and family, our work, our church, our daily decisions and choices, our hopes, dreams, and concerns; are the vineyards in which we are to reveal the presence and life of God, to produce the fruits of the kingdom. The vineyards, our work in those vineyards, and the fruit produced, come together to reveal to us that we are sharers in God's kingdom; or we are not.

To the degree we are not producing kingdom fruits, we have excluded ourselves from, and rejected our share in the kingdom. We are living neither as the people God knows us to be, nor as the people we truly want to be. In some way, we have stepped outside of ourselves and sidestepped our own life. That's the truth with which Jesus confronted the Pharisees. It's the same truth with which Jesus confronts us.

So, here's an important question, I think. How do we come to the point where we self-exclude ourselves from the Kingdom? Is there a clue we can glean from the Pharisees and friends? Well, whether the Pharisees experienced this, or not, I know from many encounters with people that if you ever struggle with: perfectionism, self-condemnation, and question whether you are good enough for God, then you are self-excluding.

Have you ever felt like you had to always be in control, to be always right and have all the answers? Maybe that's self-exclusion. Are you even now carrying grudges, anger, or resentment? Maybe that's self-exclusion. How about this one? Do you ever look at others and begin to make judgments about their beliefs, choices, or lifestyle? I suspect that's self-exclusion.

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Oh, here's a hard one. Are there people in your life that you have chosen to let go of, rather than do the hard work of reconciliation and heal that relationship?

I bet that's self-exclusion. Do you go through life on a kind of auto-pilot, showing up, going through the motions, but not really being there? Maybe that's self-exclusion. In your life, is there more cynicism and criticism, than thanksgiving and celebration? Is that self-exclusion? Are you hanging onto some old guilt that you believe could not be forgiven? Is that self-exclusion?

The antidote to our self-exclusion from God's kingdom, begins with first recognizing that self-exclusion. This is what Jesus was trying to get across to the Pharisees with this parable. That means we must look at the vineyards of our lives. So, how's your garden growing? What do you see? Is there fruit? Is there life? Are you sharing in God's kingdom?

And what exactly is the fruit God is looking for. Notice in the parable that several representatives (slaves) of the vineyard owner came to collect the fruit. Most of the time we see these slaves as prophets who came to speak to the people of God. But Jesus told us later in Matthew, that whatever we did to the least of those around us, we do unto him. What if those who come to the vineyard we are placed in, are coming to seek the fruit from the planting of God in our midst; namely love.

How often have we rejected, beaten, or metaphorically killed someone who has come, because the vineyard owner sent them to us. People who are down and out, rejected, judged as unworthy, who come for a cup of kindness and love. As Mike Mason writes, "There is no separation between the spiritual and social. The way we feel about other people is the way we feel about God, and the way we treat people is the way we treat God." (Practicing the Presence of People, p. 15)

We need to start recognizing the value of what God has offered us. To stop seeing our little vineyards as our own personal fiefdoms, for our own aggrandisement. It is not ours. We have been entrusted with it and as the good book says, "To whomever much is given, much is expected". And as we toil, the heir of the vineyard owner is among us, toiling along side, and seeking to bring in the harvest.

Back when the Old West was being settled, pioneers flocked across the country to California and Oregon. In one particular spot on the Eastern slopes of the Rockies there was a large, dirt covered rock protruding in the middle of the trail. Wagon wheels were broken on it and men tripped over it. Finally, someone dug up the odd stone and rolled it off trail into a nearby stream.

The stream at that point was too wide to jump over, so people used the now convenient stone as a step to cross the cold creek. It was used this way for many years, until finally one settler decided to build his cabin near the stream.

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He saw the old well used stone moved the odd stone out of the stream, and placed it in his cabin to serve as a doorstep. As years passed, railroads were built and towns sprang up. The old settler's grandson went east to study geology.

On a visit to his grandfather's cabin, the grandson happened to examine the old lump of stone, and discovered within that lump of dirt and rock, was the largest pure gold nugget ever discovered on the eastern slope of the Rockies. It had been there for three generations, and people never recognized its value. To some it was a stumbling stone to be removed.

To others it was a stepping-stone, and to others it was just a heavy rock. But only the grandson saw it for what it really was; a lump of pure gold. Jesus is the precious rock God has given us to be the both the cornerstone, and the capstone of our lives. Will you come to the rock today? Will you build your life upon Him? One day, you will discover, Jesus will either be a stepping-stone that gives you access to God, or He will be a rock over which you stumble. The choice is yours.

So, when the Son, Jesus, comes to collect the fruit of our labours, will he find such an abundance of love that his joy may be complete, and our reward assured? I hope so, and wouldn't that be something to be thankful about..