

**“It Makes No Sense”**  
**18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – October 4, 2020 – Mt 21:33-46**

It makes no sense. None of what is going on around us is making any sense in the world that we had created for ourselves. Within our lifetime we have gone from living safely, comfortably, with privilege and status that the world has looked at as a vision for themselves and a model of “a better life.” So, what went wrong? How did we get to where we are today? And what, if anything can we do about getting back to our original plan?

You know, sometimes things just don’t work out as you planned. Sometimes, we have to reinterpret what we have known before, and start from scratch. Sometimes, “March comes in like a lion” – seeking a pound of our flesh and an accountability for our lifestyles, our freedoms, our choices. A flood comes, or a wildfire, or a virus which causes the loss of loved ones and livelihood, and forces us to rethink, and to try again.

Our story today is a small example of Jesus’ attempt to reboot a system. It is set within the context of his overarching mission to the chosen people of God, which is basically a call to repent (to turn around, to start again.) The world God intended is falling into disarray, and Jesus, God’s loving presence among us, who will lead off with the warning of the prophet Joel, to “return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

But, just as any of you who have offspring know very well, warnings are not often embraced, especially by our beloved children: don’t touch, be careful, don’t smoke or do drugs, don’t go to bars, wear a mask, take your time, watch your step. Maybe warnings just require some maturity, or understanding and experience. Maybe they just don’t make sense to us at the time.

Jesus is igniting a reformation. He is reinterpreting much of what his audience, the Pharisees and leaders of the religious order, have come to hold as sacred, and so it is not an easy task. But as always, Jesus begins with something they all know.

Today’s 1st lesson is from Isaiah, and it is known as *The Song of the Vineyard*. It’s the original passage that Jesus uses for his parable:

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill  
He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,  
and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes,  
but it yielded wild grapes.

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah,  
judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.  
I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;  
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

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! -- **Isaiah 5:1-7**

God has created an amazing environment for his beloved...  
 a place of beauty and abundant possibilities. The hard work has already been done: the digging and clearing of stones that might inhibit the growth of the choicest vines. The placement of a watchtower to survey the growth, and a vat anticipating harvest grapes to make a fine wine. And yet, even after all the planning, the clearing, the building, the equipment – when all the preparations were completed – somehow the vineyard produced bitter, unusable wild grapes. This was not the expectation. This was not the plan. But nevertheless, it is what resulted. Who was at fault? Why was the expectation of abundant harvest and fine wine not met? That, my friends, is The Question of the Day, and the sadness that grieves the heart of God. This was a warning for those to come who desire to serve and delight the God of our ancestors.

When Jesus takes this well-known story and tells it in updated language, the leaders of the church may not have seen themselves as the wicked tenants. They might not have recognized how they took the vineyard, gleaned the produce and the profits and bullied, beat and killed those who called them to account. It happened again and again until finally the landowner sent his own son to remind them who they were, and whose land they tended.

We know how that turns out. The Son of God came to warn us, to remind us whose we are, and we were so scared of our own actions that we sent him away on a Roman cross. It makes no sense. Never did, never will. We can only accept our role in it as sinners, and take every opportunity to confess and ask God's forgiveness. So, "Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another." (please repeat these phrases after me):

**I confess to God Almighty, before the whole company of heaven,  
 and to you my brothers and sisters,  
 that I have sinned by my own fault, in thought, word and deed.  
 I pray God Almighty, to have mercy on me,  
 forgive me all my sins and bring me to everlasting life.**

"As a called and ordained minister of the church of Px, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

It's been said that when you're not sure what to do, it's always best to go back to the things you know are **true**. At Worship on the Green this morning, we were reminded of the starting point of our lives of faith. We gathered in a large (socially distant) circle around the edges of the labyrinth and we brought Calvin into the center of that circle. We then enacted an ancient and historic ritual – the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. We watched as the newest member of the Kingdom of God was born again, and each one of us had the opportunity to remember for ourselves, when our love affair with the Almighty began in earnest.

And this is the power of the grace of God. That even knowing that we would not accept responsibility for our failures, our disappointing choices and our disobedient hearts, God would still love us – no matter what. We receive without merit. We steward God's gifts in freedom, and without accountability. And we are consistently invited – over and over

again – into the abundant life and ever-open arms of the One who loves us, even better than we love ourselves.

You have many choices in this life, and I pray that we each choose wisely. However, the one thing over which you have absolutely no control is the truth that ***God loves you, and there is nothing you can do about it.*** That, too, makes no sense. But aren't you glad that - when all is said and done - Jesus loves you? Yeah. Me, too. Amen.

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### **“Hard to Hear”**

#### **(Pr 22) Pentecost 17 - Oct 5, 2014 - Is 5:1-7 & Mt 21:33-46/A**

If you have attended a class I have taught on Symbols, you have probably seen me use a clip from the movie, *The DaVinci Code*. It is the scene where Tom Hanks' character, a professor, is introducing a lecture on symbols. He shows a few, and asks what the audience's first impression is of what they see. For instance: Think of a triangle: Trinity? Or, the patch to identify prisoners in concentration camps? A pitchfork: Satan? Or the trident of Neptune (the Greek God of the Sea) and a symbol of power. A Swastika: Nazis? Or a cross used by the Navajo Indians and ancient Buddhists, as a symbol of peace. You can see that *the correct interpretation of symbols is almost always dependent on their context*. However, the circle (or wheel) has maintained one basic interpretation over centuries. It symbolizes wholeness, balance and completion.

Jesus used symbols to interpret the times through his preaching and teaching, but also in his actions: the triumphant entry into Jerusalem and palm procession signaled that the victor, the Messiah has come! The cursing of a fig tree alongside the scourging/purification of the Temple, were symbolic of the failure of the old guard and the beginning of something new. These were signs that the New Age, the Kingdom of God had begun to break in to human history...

Our first lesson today was Isaiah's "Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard." It is a love song by the prophet about God's beloved, and the vineyard symbolizes Israel. Regardless of God's love, Israel has been faithless. The question is raised, *what more could God have done?* God prepared in the very best ways, planting and cultivating for a harvest of faithfulness, justice, and righteousness; protecting the vineyard with hedges and watchtower...but what God received was something else altogether. Something God hadn't planned for, nor expected. In spite of God's protection and provision - all the divine efforts - God is disappointed at the lack of good fruit. (Don't you just hate it when you can't see any effect of your presence?) Don't you just hate putting in all that energy and time when you just have to do it over and over again? Well,

that is where God is in Isaiah's song. And it is where Jesus is after spending three years investing in those who had chosen to follow him.

So, Jesus brings this well-known scriptural symbol right alongside the Parables he is using to teach. His audience would have recognized the Vineyard as Israel...and even more so, these Religious Leaders who are being confronted by new reality. They should have been prepared; they had *expected* for a long time. Yet the reality of God's vineyard was not what they had expected:

*First*, Jesus claimed his authority from their boss (in essence, he went over their heads!)

*Second*, Jesus challenged their concept of God in world, and

*Third*, Jesus re-interpreted Isaiah's love-song of vineyard.

And then they realized he was speaking about them. They realized it was they who were unfaithful. They realized Jesus' parables questioned their leadership abilities. They were hearing a hard word - receiving a bad evaluation - failing their coursework miserably. And they were afraid. They had thought the owner was never coming back, so got lazy; they had not been paying attention to the vineyard's fruitfulness; they had forgotten themselves and they forgot who was in charge, so they were living as ruthless tenants in Jesus' Parable Vineyard!

That is the point where this parable comes forward and becomes a *hard word* for us. Those who followed Jesus out of ancient Judaism, became the Christian movement – then the Church – which is us. You see, God's plan was for us to hear a word of grace and go beyond it...but as humans, we tend to stop when we've got ours and relax, we get complacent.

Adult Bible Studies are so enlightening. They are made up of so many good folks who believe in God, and live faithful lives. Yet, they are still not sure that they have been saved. So let me reiterate what Jesus' overarching message was (and is.)

First, your salvation **has been accomplished** because of God's love for you. You need DO nothing, only believe it. Take a look at the cross. That is where it happened. That is where you were saved. Second, after looking at the cross and believing it, you ask, "*how then shall I live?*" In Jesus' teaching, there is a fundamental understanding: God, the Creator owns everything and we are simply tenants, "borrowing" the field in which we live and work, using resources provided for us, talents granted to us to be used for the greater good in the kingdom.

When this is understood and enacted in our lives - good fruit results. That fruit is the natural order - a reboot to the "default" setting of God's intention. And that fundamental arrangement of things IS God's will for us. And when the vineyard is in balance, there's wholeness in our lives and in our communities.

But beware the world...last week, the parable setting was political; today it is economic. Noted Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says our "*market ideology*" *preys on our fears of being exposed for our lack of productivity, of being found inadequate disciples*. I have no doubt that many of you worry about that same thing, about where or when you might be exposed for not knowing the Bible; for not knowing when to stand or sit or what page it is on in the ELW; for not having proper instruction in what is "Lutheran" and what you need to believe or DO to receive God's grace. But these are merely symbols - stand-ins for fears that hold us captive...

The Wheel: a Circle symbolizing balance and wholeness. And, perhaps, a progress report for you and your vineyard - not to see where you need to DO more or less, but an exercise to help you find the "you" that God intended – the "you" that is a harvest of Good Fruit. Amen.

**Resources: *The DaVinci Code* movie; ELCA blog; Working Preacher/Sermon Brainwave;**

The last time I contributed a "Dear Working Preacher" column, I insisted that sermons have to set people free.

Some biblical texts make that task incredibly difficult.

Consider Matthew's account of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants and Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard. These related passages are very evocative and full of poignant details for pulpit storytellers to put to imaginative use. But the point of both texts is to deliver stinging indictments.

Still, don't take shortcuts. Liberators know that sometimes you have to convince people who need to be set free that they are in captivity in the first place. Indictments can help.

It is difficult for many of us to preach texts like these. Most Working Preachers prefer binding up wounds over doing new damage. So how might we go about preaching difficult words this week in constructive and truthful ways? I have three suggestions.

First, especially with these passages, don't stray away from specifics.

Remember that both of these texts describe stern indictments issued to specific people who had specific roles in specific contexts at specific times in ancient history. The texts come from traumatized authors who were attempting to make theological sense of fresh and real historical tragedies. They aren't abstract promises of judgment urging us to talk about evil and godlessness as concepts. Don't ignore their particularity, and don't manipulate their subject matter to make them serve your own ends.

The specificity draws us into the historical contexts behind the texts, which helps us consider perspectives beyond our own, so we might better come to acknowledge the specific things in our lives

that would indict *us*. The parable in Matthew describes a refusal to embrace the accountability that God demands and an arrogant disregard for divine authority. The wider Matthean context suggests also that self-serving and self-enriching religious leadership contributes to the problem that Jesus opposes. Isaiah's love song characterizes its indictment as the consequence of a failed love story. The wider Isaianic context indicates that part of God's heartbreak comes from people's willingness to trample upon the powerless if that's what it takes to secure their own comfort. What, exactly, do these sins look like now, where you live?

The people who were the specific targets of the two biblical indictments are long gone, but preachers can name how sins reincarnate themselves in our hearts and systems. Like these prophets—Isaiah and Jesus—use your creativity and know your audience. Avoid generalizations. Vague and intangible references to “greed,” “rebellion,” “misogyny,” “injustice,” and “hardheartedness” rarely find a place to land and settle in. Only particularity sticks. Indictments that can't latch on have no effect and thus no power to produce change.

Second, don't stray away from an indictment's power to lead to confession and confession's power to reorient us.

In other words, don't treat the act of confession and the act of hearing the sermon as separate, disconnected liturgical elements. These biblical passages involve speakers trying to reveal the truth to audiences who can't discern it through their usual ways of perceiving. Likewise, we need help in learning to confess together and to see how confession is usually the first step in living into the Bible's demands for faithfulness, justice, and mercy.

Confession is about declaring a mutually-agreed-upon understanding. It is a shared admission. Confession is a decision to leave denial behind and embrace the truth about ourselves as individuals and as groups. No wonder it's so hard to do. It's easier to have someone do that work for us, assuming we're even willing to admit that such work is necessary.

A sermon on one or both of these biblical passages might offer opportunities for people to sit with what the texts name and reveal in our contemporary hearing. Anticipate what congregation members are to do with what they come to perceive, if the sermon succeeds in shining light from a new, revelatory angle. You might want to revisit the prayer of confession, if your tradition employs one, as part of the sermon and consider the wisdom of why we pray those words together, as a community formed in Christ.

When we confess in response to indictment, we discover the power that resides in naming the specific things that we need to escape from, heal from, or dismantle.

We have to take time with indictments, especially when they are—like Jesus' and Isaiah's—about abusive power and indifference toward the marginalized. The church cannot complain about those wrongs to the wider world until we have first committed ourselves to reckon with them in our own beliefs and practices.

Third, don't stray away from graciousness and respect.

Confessing and naming the truth together sound great in theory, but agreeing about the truth is more than a little challenging in the current social landscape. Discourse among people of faith feels increasingly indistinguishable from what occurs in the wider culture. Rage, disdain, and accusation seem to be crouching around every corner, and irritable self-assurance is so much easier to muster than empathy. Empathy makes us vulnerable, after all. And vulnerability feels too precarious when our days are so dangerous.

These two texts go out of their way to emphasize loss and the disappointment of wasted opportunities. Working Preachers who have liberation on their minds will be careful to help congregations remember that God has a penchant for rebuilding what was once torn down.

That line about the rejected stone that finally becomes the cornerstone? It's usually interpreted as a reference to Jesus. But I also see it as an apt description of church when we're willing to face the truth of our own complicities, to acknowledge our flaws with unvarnished honesty, to be willing to undergo brokenness ... and then to be remade.

That's the deliverance waiting beyond the indictments and confession: a church refashioned into a living expression of the new life that God constructs. A free-standing building, constructed one stone at a time

## Curry on Day1

### III. Clint Eastwood

But maybe his greatest achievement, or at least my favorite, was the film "Invictus"-- the story of Nelson Mandela and the people of South Africa-- the story of how a nation divided by race, class, color avoided a racial civil war between black, white, and colored, a war that would have rendered the streets of Johannesburg, and Cape Town, Soweto, red with the flow of human blood. **"Invictus." (unconquerable or undefeated)**

Early in the film, after Mandela had been released from prison, after a new democracy was being established and elections held and he was elected president, Mandela assumed office; he walked into the government complex, the equivalent of the White House. As he entered on this first day, you could see most of the white government employees emptying their drawers, packing their things, getting ready to leave. They assumed they knew what was coming. He ordered all the government workers to meet him in a large auditorium. All the previous staff were white. All of the staff from the African National Congress were black or colored. The same was true of the security details, and all were present and armed. He spoke to the two security details and said they must become one security detail. Needless to say, neither group was thrilled. Then he turned and addressed everyone in the room-- black, colored, and white alike. And he said something like this:

"The rainbow nation begins here...

Reconciliation begins here...

Forgiveness begins here...

And forgiveness is the power that liberates the soul.

Love begins today.

And today, the new South Africa begins."

**...I've been around politicians my whole life, but I've not once heard one talk about reconciliation, forgiveness, justice, and love. That's not the typical language of power politics. That's the language of Jesus. That's what the Master taught us.**

Mandela (was a man) who actually tried to follow in the footsteps and the way of Jesus of Nazareth and his love.

### **Tutu's remarks at the YG in STL – (Mandela) + the prayers of the world**

And when the record is written, it will show that Nelson Mandela and others like him led a revolution in South Africa, a revolution that did not degenerate into hatred and violence

and bloodshed. It did not degenerate into a racial civil war. They led a revolution based on love and justice and truth and reconciliation that created a multi-racial society.

**Do not be deceived. Love is the most potent reality in all of the universe.**