

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Three of our four readings today talk about vines or vineyards, owners and workers or both. They are allegorical in style with many possible connections but most people and most theologians tend to connect the vines, vineyards, and workers to humans, and the landowners and managers to God. Do you think you made similar connections as you listened to the readings? Are you aware that you may have made similar connections in the past to these or other similar readings? Have you ever maybe considered that there is in Jesus' teaching a fundamental and overarching reminder that only the Creator, God owns everything? If this is true it can mean we **are** simply tenants leasing out talents or vineyards from God and that God has granted these to **us** to be used for greater good in the kingdom. Does this change our relationship to God and to each other?

I know you know that I often discuss the difficulties in translating the Bible. After all, most Greek words in the Bible can be translated into many possible English words. Yes, these words almost always have similar connotations, but slightly different inferences as well, a lot of which is based on the lenses of both the interpreter and the reader. But the idea of biblical accuracy goes a whole lot further back than that even. First, much of the biblical narrative has been passed down through the centuries using the oral tradition. Second, the oral stories and the first writings were, for the most part, **not** in Greek either. In other words, there have been other languages that were translated into Greek with the **same** inherent issues in translation.

Third, a complete, original printing of the Bible in **any** of the original languages does not exist. Scholars have scraps and pieces of various sizes from numerous documents from a variety of time periods. And yes, there are multiple copies of complete scrolls of the Jewish Torah in almost every Jewish Temple. Fourth, none of this is to say that the Bible is not God's word. Of course the Bible is God's word, as in word with a little "w". Also according to the Bible, Jesus **is** God's Word with a big "W".

Fifth, ultimately God's story and word has been processed through humans and human mechanisms for centuries. Now I am not sure for you but it is abundantly clear to me that we humans have a strong penchant for making a mess of what God created.

All that being said, there is still one more factor effecting how we understand the Bible. As we humans and our cultures and our societies evolve so does our language. Words today often have a different meaning and connotation than the same word had a few or hundreds of years ago. I recently saw a funny example of this. It said: "2000 years from now, people will not understand the difference between a "butt dial" and a "booty call." I have previously talked, for instance, about the word dominion used in Genesis 1 and 2. Today, in our culture we think of dominion in terms of sovereignty, control, lordship, rule, or domination. But in Genesis 1 and 2, the dominion **then** was to be good stewards of God's creation and care for it.

In our readings today an underlying premise is also justice. We typically think today of justice as a moral righteousness concept based on equity, ethics, law, natural law, rationality, and/or religion. On the other hand, biblical justice is being generous, gracious, loving, merciful, and restorative; as well as providing for the needs of the poor and vulnerable; **and** protecting the oppressed. This concept of justice is consistent throughout the entire Bible but especially in the actions, words, and teachings of Jesus. **We** tend to call this type of justice "social justice" but it is in reality so much more than just social.

In our Isaiah reading the "beloved" owner of the vineyard is God, and the vineyard is Israel. Then in our gospel reading God is the landowner, the Pharisees and us as well are the tenants, and Jesus is the son. I think it behooves us to remember that we are responsible for tending all of God's creation in caring and uplifting ways.

It would also behoove us to remind ourselves of the leadership and authority styles over and over again by God and Jesus because that is what leadership looks like in the kingdom of God. **Especially** in our culture and society now, where leadership hypocrisy seems not only acceptable but expected. Where justice for all really means justice for just a few – most often like us. Yes, there even are plenty of leaders out there, both church and state, who have forgotten that central to leadership is the faithful care of those under their charge. For so many, their leadership is about their greed, their success, themselves without ever seeming to consider what is enough. When is enough. What about **our** leadership? What about **your** leadership?

I recently saw a description of how most of our world operates. Imagine playing Monopoly and never buying any assets or investments that generate income. Imagine you just went around collecting \$200 and giving your money to the rich and just **trying** to stay out of jail. That, my friends, is how most people live.

After all of this, I must remind you of verses 13 and 14 in our Philippians reading today that I quoted just a few weeks ago. They say: "**Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.**" Notice first that Paul acknowledges that whatever success he has is not his doing. Then Paul is able to **not** reside in the past but to press on, to move forward, to look ahead. This my friends is grace in action. Others and ourselves make mistakes, we are, after all, humans. But just as God has extended grace to us, we are to extend grace to others **and**, my friends, to ourselves.

Richard Rohr said: "*God's harshest words of judgment were reserved for those who perpetuated systems of inequality and oppression and who, through religion itself, thought they were sinless and untouchable. Jesus did not so much love people **once** they changed, but rather Jesus loved people so that they **could** change.*" This is why Jesus was always at odds with the Pharisees.

Hear then the good news:

Jesus did not shrink from sacrifice on the cross.

Jesus did not return with vengeance.

Jesus does not kick anyone out of the kingdom of God.

We need not **respond** to violence with more violence.

Violence does not and **will** not have the last word.

Tragedy, death, loss, and hatred are, in the end, no match for love, life, forgiveness, and peace.

May God grant us a vision of what God intends us to be: a vineyard where we produce fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness.

Chad Bird says: "*In our every interaction with others, especially those with whom we disagree, let us say to ourselves, 'This is one for whom Christ died.'*"

Grace and peace to you, my friends. Be faithful, gentle and full of mercy.

**Amen**