



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Vineyard of St. Bart's

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 5, 2014
The seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 21:33-46*

The highlight of the summer for me was a great trip in August to France, where we spent a couple of weeks in or near vineyards with a bit of tasting here or there, maybe a bit more than a bit. The luscious grapes hanging heavy on the vines signaled the coming of the harvest, and even we as casual tourists could feel the anticipation of the new crop, excitement and anxiety present all around. Everything depends upon the success of the harvest. Living with the story from Matthew this week inevitably reminded me of those vineyards. I found myself wondering about the people associated with them, the owners and the workers.

Even though for most of us life is not lived with much conscious thought of vineyards, the notion is a rich one in ancient sacred literature. Jesus in particular used it regularly in parables about life. The vineyard as metaphor signifies a venue in which God's people figure life out or not and usually some of both, a place where we live faithfully or not, where we tend and harvest the good crop sometimes, and the place where we occasionally, and maybe even often, carefully grow and tend a crop which will never satisfy us. The vineyard as metaphor comes with all sorts of applications in our lives—economic, theological, environmental.

The gospel passage for today is a complicated one and honestly not too pleasant, showing as it does the thorniness of religion and the kind of hard work serious readers of scripture must engage for it to be truly meaningful in our lives. Many scholars believe that the basic story authentically comes from Jesus. An absentee landlord sends each year emissaries to gather the fruit of the harvest, deploying first two sets of slaves and finally his own son, each in turn being killed. It is a sad story, and it is difficult to say precisely what Jesus meant by telling it. Some have heard it as a cry against the exploitation and tyranny of the poor at the hand of a faraway landowner. That would certainly be consistent with Jesus' predilection for the poor; and, yet, it is not where the narrators of the story, a story found in each of the synoptic gospels, took it.

Most likely and understandably wanting not to leave such an enigmatic story unexplained, the gospel narrators completed it with an allegory that even a casual hearer at the time would understand. The original tenants, the Jews, the keepers of Judaism, had rejected the true son, Jesus, and, as a result, were dealt with summarily and brutally. It is a concise, neat allegory and one which fit well the fact that there was a growing divide between Jews who would remain faithful to Judaism and Jews who were beginning to understand themselves as something other than Jewish, something coming to be called Christian. But it is a deeply unfortunate expansion of Jesus' original story, one of many early claims of the narrators used to justify centuries of anti-Semitism. I take comfort in believing that the allegory offered as explanation was more likely derived from a hurting, divided community than from the heart of Jesus.

For you see, when put into broad historical context, the allegory doesn't speak truthfully or authoritatively to some of us; nor must it. We read these rich wonderful texts from various points of view, understanding always imperfectly but as well as we can, garnering the snippets of eternal truth which come to us through and sometimes, as in this case, above and beyond the literal words of the story. On the surface, this account could easily be dismissed as so contrary to what we believe to be true about God that we might miss a deeply important question it poses to us living here, right now in 21st century New York City.

The language is archaic and arcane; and yet the question is critical: what does it mean for us to live and thrive in the vineyard of God? As keepers of God's vineyard on earth, as surely all humankind is, what fruits are we to produce? What does life in the vineyard of God look like? Is it a place of certainty and precision about the doctrines

of Christianity, doctrines that developed long after the life of Jesus? Is it a place where we are right and all others are wrong at their peril? And what is the harvest in the vineyard of God to be? Are we here to be as successful and acquisitional as possible? Does the one who dies with the most toys indeed win? If not that crass (and God may it be so), then what is it that characterizes our lives as that of faithful people—not perfect people—but faithful people living in God’s vineyard?

The Apostle Paul, writing in the nascent period of the Jesus movement several years before Matthew, put a fairly fine point on that question in his letter to the Galatians. He identified for them (and us) the characteristics of a truly successful life, and it is quite a list: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Isn’t it interesting that overt religiosity or correctness is not found in the list? Though some of the words attributed to Jesus suggest otherwise, in the stories about his life he never seemed to be concerned with promoting one kind of religion over another but simply with living with these characteristics, fruits of the spirit as they are poetically known.

The list never fails to cause me to wonder how much agency each of these characteristics really has in my life, wondering how many we even truly desire. Yes, of course, we want love, joy and peace in our lives though our paths to them are often convoluted and self-centered. We say we value patience—even as a virtue—but we live with hardwired impatience. One morning just this past week, crossing 2nd Avenue on my way to the House of God, I became so annoyed with a bus blocking the intersection that I actually considered kicking it—as though it would have done anything but make my foot hurt. And in my collar no less! Are we kind? Well, when it works to be, we are kind-ish. Somehow we have decided that to be kind we have to have kind feelings. As a fruit of the spirit, "kind" has the quality of a verb: we are to act kindly whether or not kind feelings come. Are we generous? Sure we are in lots of ways, but we are also fearful hoarders, hoarding our love for fear that we will be hurt just as we hang on to our accumulations for fear that we shall be nothing without them. Are we faithful and gentle and self-controlled? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Faithfulness, I believe, is valued; we want to see ourselves and those we love as people of fidelity. In reality, we are fidelity-challenged in all sorts of ways, certainly often in relationships, but more widely than that as well, somehow not faithful to ourselves. As for gentleness, we approach it cautiously, letting our children know that being too gentle is not often the path to great success.

Yesterday there was an offsite retreat for the Vestry, which is our governing body. We never used the words vineyard or fruits of the spirit, but in essence we spent the day talking about the kind of vineyard we want to be here at St. Bart’s, the quality of our harvest. We spoke of it as a place, real and virtual, where we receive solace, comfort, admitting frankly that sometimes we use it as respite from the reality of our busy and crazy lives. And we gave thanks for a place where without shame we can be nourished, where we can acknowledge how little we know and how often we fear.

But we also agreed that we come to be changed, to leave this place not simply feeling better but renewed. We come to learn again how to love more widely, to shine more brightly as beacons of light and goodness, to be recharged so that we can bring sanctuary wherever we can in this deeply broken world. We come to be refilled with generous spirits, not just the reluctant willingness, but the great desire to share what we have; and we come to bear witness that cynicism, despondency and the arrogance of being right will not in the end win in our lives or in the world.

Far from perfect, the vineyard of St. Bart’s remains a great laboratory for life, a place where ordinary people, just like you and me, can ask big questions and consider big answers, a place where we can experiment with the new life to which we are called, a place where we can be and a place where we can become.

In the name of God: *Amen.*