

YOU ARE IN THE VINEYARD

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

A Collect for Proper 21, The Book of Common Prayer

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 21A: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

OCTOBER 1, 2017

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not;' but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

You, we, are in the vineyard.

And likely we are of two minds about it, not sure what to think or feel about it, sometimes clear about what to do, other times not.

And the collection of people around us raises some questions and some eyebrows...

The things we say and say to ourselves are astounding.... And Jesus is trying to wake us up in the

same way he was always attempting to awaken those who questioned him.

In this encounter with the religious authorities in the temple, Jesus gets questions about authority from people who saw themselves as “authorized” and for whom the structure of authorization and the statement of it was important.

Jesus, teaching there in the temple, was not authorized.

So whatever good points and bad points the authorization process had, Jesus was outside of it. Personally, if my authorization structure *excluded* Jesus, I think I would have to go back to the drawing board. (Clearly, they weren’t seeing that....)

And, essentially, this is what Jesus is saying: you are obsessed by something that is not real. It is not real for you, it is not real for those around you, it is not real for the world in general. It is talking about talking. I had a meeting about a meeting last week and it was one of the most unreal things I’ve done for a long time....

And, by the way, the work that John the Baptist did *was* real, but that conversation was sidelined by the fact that the “authorities” got tongue-tied by their own questions....

So Jesus moves on.

And he says that while authorization questions are moving through the system, there is a vineyard that is alive and green and fruitful and needs your attention.

Will you work in it? Will you give yourself to it?

Jesus is not a perfectionist. He realizes, probably from first-hand experience, how our minds work.

And we all know it is not as simple as the two sons he sketches out in this parable. It isn’t as simple as saying yes but not going or saying no but going after all. There are a thousand clicks on the dial and we use them all....

And that was a story.

Truth is, we’re in the vineyard.

And the vineyard is within each of us.

Life is going on.

“Vineyard” is a great metaphor for life and vineyards crop up a lot in scripture – often in Hebrew scripture and we encounter vineyards in the gospel readings week by week in this green season.... And, of course, *we*, here, encounter *real* vineyards and we know that a vineyard may be a metaphor – but here it is someplace where people show up and work hard and the outcomes are, well, varied....

People get hurt, and people experience incredible triumphs and failings, beauty and ugliness, exhilaration and exhaustion. There is life and there is death. And something comes out of vineyards, for us, but mostly for others – unknown others....

Will you have it?

That's the question Jesus is asking.

But the vineyard isn't optional... here we are.

You don't have to be authorized. Actually you can't be...

Jesus points to the fact that unauthorized others are already here and already moving up and down the rows tending the vines... yes, you see them as tax collectors and prostitutes, Jesus says, but I see them as people.

It's an open vineyard. It's for everyone. Bring your no and your yes, your authorization or rejection letter, your hesitations and enthusiasms, your failures and successes, what you have and what you've lost.

And there's the resonance with what Paul was writing the Philippians: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is *God who is at work in you*, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

Paul isn't saying we have to be afraid, scared of anything; he's

saying to respect the process, face into the resistance, the anxiety and go for it... there's life out there and in here – in us, among us, beyond us – and the life – *all* life – is God living in us.

God in Christ offers us an open present and an open future. The greenness of the vineyard becomes a greening within – for each of us and for the community – faith community and wider community.

The greening? Surely it is compassion – for ourselves, for others, for the world... always the focus of Jesus, always the revelation of God, that nothing exists outside of compassion and that compassion is life within us, life that is life.

So, what do we "do" when so much of our life has been struggling and contending and striving with or for authorization and ownership, empowerment and disempowerment....

Perhaps "do" is superseded by "be," but then there is a lot to do in a vineyard: create, love, tend, hope, proclaim, abide, offer, hold, embrace, experience, encourage, envelope, absorb, expand...

We may think a lot is hanging in the balance – but Jesus has already been there.... and compassion, again, was the outcome. The results are known....

Which is to say compassion is

mostly action – and, in the vineyard, that are a lot of ways for compassion to become real – so all of this is for our work lives, are family lives, our lives with friends, encountering strangers, moving beyond our habitual patterns of thought or what we do conventionally – to seek and express compassion, to receive the fullness of what we seek from an abundant and generous giver of life.

While we may (or may not) be bothered by being welcomed into a vineyard that also welcomes people we see as tax collectors and prostitutes, we know the welcome is complete, real, and that who we really are, all of it, is welcome in as well.

You are in the vineyard. We are in the vineyard.

Our gift is compassion, and our work is compassion.



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