

Sermon – Matthew 21:33-46; Isaiah 5:1-7

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“Vintage Grace”

Friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. What a fortuitous set of biblical texts for Faith Promise Sunday! On this day when we focus on stewardship – of our time, talent, and treasure – we are reminded that we are, in fact, stewards. Stewards are, by definition, not owners. In Isaiah’s song and Jesus’ story, we hear of a landowner who owned a vineyard. Yes, we are back in another vineyard today. Isaiah and Jesus tell us of all the landowner has done to prepare the land. Stones have been cleared, choice vines planted, a fence and a tower built. What else could the landowner have done? Put into the trust of the stewards, the people, *us*, however, things go quickly and definitively awry. The good grapes of justice and righteousness have become bloodshed and a cry. The stewards have forgotten their place and are in full rebellion, thinking they can make the vineyard their own. They even put the owner’s son to death. And what will happen to such horrible stewards? The religious leaders with whom Jesus is speaking believe they know, perhaps because it’s what they would do. These wretched stewards will be put to a miserable death, and the vineyard will be given to others. So, if that is what may happen to bad stewards, I’d like to invite you into better stewardship. Please take out your Faith Promise cards and add twenty percent to your financial commitment. And while you’re at it, check a few more boxes for volunteer and service opportunities. Better safe than sorry, friends!

2. If only it were so easy. But frankly, things in the vineyard may be too far gone. Both Isaiah and Jesus are clear. God has done all that is needed for creation to flourish, and for us to flourish within in. Our readings are filled with details of judicious planning and care. In contrast to this is the violence unleashed by those called to care for the vineyard. The preacher Carolyn Sharp notes that “the affective force of the parable is generated in no small part by the contrast in verbs of tending and verbs of death-dealing.” The violence in the parable is, if we’re paying attention, startling. Those sent by the landowner are beaten, stoned, or killed. Finally, the owner’s son is seized, thrown out, and killed. And again, those with whom Jesus is speaking assume that the answer to all of this bloodshed is more bloodshed, violence upon violence to make things right.

3. As in the parable, so in our world – the violence, if we’re paying attention, is startling. There is, in our broken-down vineyard, never a shortage of examples. There is our extractive, violent attitude toward the vineyard itself, seeking as much as we can take for ourselves. Our minds range from Gaza to Ukraine to Iran. And closer to home, too. This week, a failed execution in Tennessee brought again to the forefront the notion of state violence and capital punishment. Is violence and death today really the way to find justice for violence and death in the past? This week, the allegations of Jane Doe against seven fraternity brothers at Cornell have made painfully clear, again, the prevalence of sexual violence, and of how often we, as a society, fail victims in the wake of this violence, which is a kind of violence, too. Justice and righteousness? Instead, a cry of pain and lament.

4. Into this vineyard of violence comes the Son. The response of the tenants in the parable is, of course, ludicrous. Not only do they think they can get away with this one last murder; they go so far as to believe they by killing the heir, they will become inheritors themselves. Why they would think such a thing is beyond me, but their bloodlust has clearly gone to their heads. So, they seize

him, toss him out, and put him to death. What will happen next? Will the landowner enact violence and vengeance? That's certainly what one would expect in this world. But here, the parable ends. This story is told by Jesus on the Tuesday of Holy Week. In just a few days, this world's tenants will seize Jesus, take him out of the city, and put him to death. A state execution to get rid of this religious rabble rouser. Except for one thing: The landowner is the Lord, and God does not respond in the way we would expect. It is not Jesus who says here that the owner will repay violence with vengeance. Fire and brimstone will not rain down upon these wicked ones. No. God will take stone that was rejected and make it the cornerstone. This Jesus who is crucified will be raised, and he comes back speaking peace. In a twist both divine and bizarre, God makes the farcical claim of the tenants come true. In the death of the Son, they do become heirs, inheritors of the promises of God in Christ. Our old lives and our violent ways are broken open on this stone, and we are raised to new life. Jesus makes clear that violence and death-dealing are not the ways of our God, and we have been saved for a new kind of life. Life eternal, yes, but also abundant life in this world – a life marked by the sanctity, safety, and dignity of all people.

5. Friends, what a fortuitous set of biblical texts for Faith Promise Sunday. Not because we can make things right by giving a little bit more, but because God is making all things right by giving everything for us, even the Son, in whose death and life we live. We are not the owners. This is not ours and thank God for that! Called by Christ, our purpose at Grace is to grow in grace, live with love, and go to serve. We make commitments and promises, offering to share some of what has been entrusted to us so that this mission and ministry at Grace and beyond might flourish and thrive. We make these promises as signs of our whole lives being given over to God's good purposes. We make these promises in response to the unbreakable promises made to us by God, in baptism and every day since. The vineyard is not yet as it should be. But God is still here, working and tending and caring for life. God is still here,

turning us from violence and death, turning us toward our neighbors in love.
God is still here, and we, in the grace of it all, simply get to join in. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your
minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.