SPEAKING ABOUT US  Sermon for October 8

[**Isaiah 5:1-7**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=162#hebrew_oth_reading)

[**Psalm 80:7-15**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=162#psalm_oth_reading)

[**Philippians 3:4b-14**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=162#epistle_reading)

[**Matthew 21:33-46**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=162#gospel_reading)

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus gives us a parable about a vineyard, and as we heard from our other readings this morning, the subject matter of our Lord’s parable has its roots in the Old Testament.  Both the prophet Isaiah and the Psalmist, writing hundreds of years before Jesus, made use of this same image of a vineyard.

In the case of both Isaiah and the Psalmist, the image of the vineyard is meant to represent the nation of Israel, and in both cases, the point being made is that the vineyard, Israel, has disappointed its owner,  God, and that therefore it has suffered or is about to suffer the consequences of that failure.

Let me read them again so that it’s fresh in our minds.

Speaking in the voice of God, Isaiah writes:

*5:4 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?  
5:5 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.  
5:6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.  
5:7 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!*

And the Psalmist, speaking **to**God in the voice of the country itself writes:

*You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.  
80:9 You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.  
80:10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches;  
80:11 it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.  
80:12 Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?  
80:13 The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.  
80:14 Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine,  
80:15 the stock that your right hand planted.*

Without going into all the historical background, both Isaiah and the Psalmist were writing in the context of terrible events that had happened to their nation, when their nation has been conquered and ravaged by foreign armies, and they were trying to make sense of their situation, in light of their belief that they were God’s own Chosen people, the vineyard God had Himself planted and nourished.  And their answer is the same: it must have somehow been the fault of the vineyard, of Israel itself, that had brought these calamities upon their nation.

And that establishes the background for our Lord’s parable.  So let’s read it together.

Matthew 21: 33-46

In the parable, the owner of the vineyard sends a series of messengers to collect the rent, and they are sent in a sort of climbing order of importance, culminating in His sending his own son.  But just as the greedy tenants had beaten and even killed the earlier messengers, they do the same thing to the owner’s son.

This parable is usually interpreted as Jesus basically communicating the same message that both Isaiah and the Psalmist were communicating before Him: that the nation of Israel had somehow failed, and that therefore now they were going to suffer the consequences, which in this case meant that Jesus was prophesying that the center of the Christian movement was going to be moved from the Jewish world into the Gentile world.  This parable and a few others were in fact the Scriptural sources that were used historically to defend the creation of a split and even of antagonism between Judaism and Christianity.

But I think that’s completely the wrong reading of what Jesus is saying.  I don’t think he was speaking prophetically at all.  I think He was here, as always, simply emphasizing the utter newness of what He Himself represented.

If you read the passage without preconception, what you’ll see is that, after Jesus has finished telling the sad story of the landowner and the greedy tenants, he asks his audience a question.  He says, essentially, that’s the story.  They kill the landowner’s son.  So what should happen next?

He doesn’t draw His own conclusion.  Instead He asks them a question?  What do you think?

And notice their answer.  What they think is that the evil and greedy tenants should be punished, should have their land taken away from them and given to somebody else.  And of course that’s what we all think, too, in listening to this story.  That would be the right thing.  That would be justice.  That’s the way the world evaluates it.

But what does Jesus think?

Matthew tells us how he responded to their answer.  Did he say, Right, you got it.  Those evil tenants will get exactly what they deserve.

No, that’s not what he says.  He says something dramatically different.  He reminds them of something they had read countless times in their own Scriptures but had never really understood.  He quotes from Psalm 118, the same Psalm we often quote from in this church at the beginning of our service:

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;*

*This was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes*

To my ear, far from being an endorsement of the answer He has just received to His question, our Lord's response in a rejection of that answer.

As we've noted before from this pulpit, the cornerstone the world requires is the stone of prideful self-reliance, the stone of its own wisdom, even its sincere moral wisdom. The stone the builders rejected, the stone the world's builders must always reject, is the stone of absolute and unwavering faith in the Word of God, who came in the flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. That's why we so often cite the passage as we begin our Sunday service, as a reminder that for an hour we are going to turn away from the world and what it thinks, and focus on the Son of God and what he thought and continues to think. And where there is conflict, we commit to following Christ, and not the world.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding," as the Proverb says (3:5), or as Paul writes to the Corinthians: "...the wisdom of the world is folly with God." (1 Cor 3: 19)

God is not in the business of laying down laws and punishing those who disobey. That's the way the world works. That's the way landowners trying to collect rent work.

God is in the business of forgiveness. That's what Jesus teaches, here and everywhere. And those who can't learn this lesson are missing out on all the riches of the Kingdom. That's why He concludes His lesson with a warning that the Kingdom of God will be given to those who respond to this truth. This isn't a prophesy of Christianity breaking off from Judaism. It's simply a description of how the Kingdom of God works, and how to begin to thrive in it.

And that's what gives a special poignancy to the reaction of the chief priests and the Pharisees, as recorded by Matthew, on hearing Jesus teach. "...they knew that he was speaking about them," Matthew tells us.

They knew that he was speaking about them.

And isn’t that the question we should always be asking ourselves as we try to distance ourselves from the particular historical circumstances in which Jesus lived, and try to see whether and how His thought applies to us?

The world we live in is markedly different from the world of the chief priests and Pharisees. We don't lead lives governed in every detail of dress and behavior and food and celebration and worship by 613 specific rules found in the first five books of the Old Testament.

But here’s the thing. Just like the Pharisees, all of us do lead our lives, down to the smallest details, in accordance with**some** combination of habits and principles, we operate out of **some** sense of duty and obligation, sometimes to people, sometimes to our job, sometimes to our country, sometimes even to what we see as our religious or moral duty.

The point is that our lives here in twenty-first century America are shaped by influences that we each got from **some**where, even though the source of our influences are most certainly very different from those that influenced the Pharisees of Christ’s time.

Jesus was not arguing against some particular set of rules for how we are to live our lives. His opponent was not Phariseeism, or any other ‘ism’.

Jesus was not against anything. He was simply for something, for one single thing. He holds it up, He says: Here it is. How does your life compare?

And so when we hear from Christ about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, and when we hear from Him that what matters most there, unlike here, is forgiveness, and mercy, and humility, and truthfulness, and subtracting from rather than adding to conflict, and not boasting, and always going the extra mile...when we hear these things and many more from Christ's own lips, do we at least pause for reflection, do we at least consider that there might be room for improvement, do we at least ask ourselves this most simple and yet most important of all questions: Is he speaking about me?

And so, gracious God, this morning we pray for an openness of heart and mind, a self-awareness that will allow us to appreciate how our characters have been shaped mainly by chance and the accidents of circumstance, a willingness to bring those characters under review, and the Divine gift of the strength to make modifications. We pray for the poverty of spirit that lies at the foundation of every life honestly lived under the guidance and in the Spirit of your dearly beloved Child, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.