

For the Love of Christ

Whenever I start to talk about politics from the pulpit, I see a particularly intent gaze in many eyes. Ears perk up, or turn off. I try to be impartial, which is difficult, both because I have my own opinions and because Jesus upset the political leaders of his time. His words challenged them, as the gospel should still challenge us. But don't worry; this is not going to be a political sermon. What I want you to do is to think about how intently you might listen to one, to hear what I would say.

That same intensity would have been present when Jesus told today's parable to his original hearers. He might already have their attention after the parable of the two sons which we heard last week – what I called “Starting Late is better than Lip Service.” The beginning of today's parable would really have riveted their attention. The crowd around Jesus would have known their Bible – and known that a similar story about a vineyard is found in the fifth chapter of Isaiah. That vineyard in Isaiah was lovingly built and planted by the Lord, and represented the people of Israel. When God came looking for ripe, juicy grapes, all he found were puny wild grapes. It was a metaphor for how the people of Israel lived. The Lord expected justice, but found bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry of the oppressed. So God planned to tear the whole thing down and let it become a wasteland.

Knowing that story, Jesus' hearers would listen carefully to see where he went with his parable. His vineyard, too, was well-built and well-supplied. It was then leased to tenants who turned out to be selfish, wanting everything for themselves. So when the landowner sent slaves to get the produce from the vineyard, they were beaten, killed, and stoned. The landowner mistakenly assumed that his son would be respected when he was sent. The wicked tenants, however, reasoned that if they did away with him, they would inherit the vineyard themselves. So they threw the son out and killed him, too. It reminds me of the story of King Ahab of Israel, who centuries earlier wanted a vineyard owned by someone else. His wife Jezebel had the owner killed and then told Ahab to go and take possession. Elijah condemned him for that. Vineyard stories just don't have happy endings.

After telling his parable with all of these Old Testament overtones, Jesus asked what would happen to those tenants. The answer was pretty obvious. “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants.” Once again, Jesus has trapped the religious leaders in their own words. The kingdom of God is going to be taken away from them and given to people who produce the fruits of the kingdom. For Matthew the Evangelist, he may have been thinking of the leaders of his own Christian community.

It's hard to see this parable as anything but a threat. The image of the cornerstone that breaks and crushes people is especially alarming. But it would be a mistake to work for the kingdom of God out of fear. Jesus does want us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those who are sick and in prison. But he wants us to do it for the love of God, not the compulsion of fear.

The Apostle Paul shows us how we might do this, even though Paul just can't refrain from boasting. In today's passage from his letter to the Philippians he lists his impeccable pedigree – born and raised a Jew, well-educated, a persecutor of the church. He boasts of his pedigree in order to put it down. He calls it all “rubbish.” Well, not quite. The meaning of the Greek word is closer to refuse, excrement, or manure. Eugene Peterson translates it “dog dung” in *The Message*, which is pretty descriptive. Paul is making a point: nothing, absolutely nothing, compares with the value of knowing Jesus Christ. At the same time, Paul is aware that there's always more to learn. There will also be more to suffer, as Christ suffered. And the power of the resurrection lies ahead for him.

As far as Paul's pedigree has taken him, he knows that his faith in Christ is only beginning. I find that very heartening. We are all beginners. Some years ago, when I was in one of the first Education for Ministry groups here at the cathedral, a member of the group lamented that he knew so little while everyone else seemed to know so much. I remember saying to him: imagine that we're traveling to the East Coast and we're planning to take Interstate 80. You're still leaving the church parking lot, and I'm already at the Brady Street interchange. Yes, I'm a couple of miles ahead of you, but given that the goal is a thousand miles away, what difference does that make? We're both at the beginning of our journey.

St. Paul knew that he was also on a journey, and had a clear sight of the goal. He strained forward to it like the outstretched neck of the lead runner in a tight race. Paul's goal was the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. As long as he kept that goal before him, it kept everything else in perspective, including pride in his pedigree.

Rather than be threatened by the parable of the vineyard, or intimidated by running far behind others, God wants us to be encouraged by the presence and companionship of Jesus. Today's Collect, prayed by Christians since at least the sixth century, sums it all up. God is always more ready to hear us than we are to pray. (I imagine God with his hand cupped to his ear, straining for even the faintest sign of a prayer.) God is ready to give more than we desire or deserve. More than we deserve, for sure. But more than we *desire*? How can that be? God is ready to pour down upon us mercy, forgiveness, and good things. God has prepared for us a well-built vineyard. Our task is to bear fruit, and return to God some of what God has given us: not only our income in support of the church, but also our time and gifts in support of God's kingdom coming into this world.

I have said it before, and I will keep saying it: the darkness of the world needs the light of Jesus Christ, and we are the ones to carry it there. Stick your neck out. Strive toward that goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Make a difference. Christ Jesus has made you his own. Through the love of Christ, *all* things are possible.

[Pentecost 18: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46.]