

A Harvest of Sacrificial Love

Meta

Date: April 6, 2025

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Isaiah 43:16–21

Psalms 126

Philippians 3:7–16

Luke 20:9–19

Opening

Since we're in the height of basketball season, I thought I'd share an interest of mine therein: I'm a fan of old school NBA. Let me define what old school means for me. The 90s Bulls teams were at the far end of old school NBA, but the height of old school NBA for me was earlier. I'm talking 80s basketball: Celtics vs. Lakers, Bird & McHale vs. Magic & Kareem. These were fierce rivalries that made basketball look a lot more like football. And then came along the Detroit Pistons in that era, the so called Bad Boys, who took physicality to the next level. Almost every foul was a flagrant foul. If you had a clear path to the bucket and drove the lane, expect a hard foul, because you were going to get hammered by Mahorn, Rodman, or Laimbeer. They didn't want to just foul you, they wanted to send a message, even send you limping to the locker room. Their mindset was simple, 'if they come in here, keep on punishing them until they stop driving the lane.'

Section 1

The same mindset exists within the tenants in today's parable, only more so. Much more so, of course. The tenants of this vineyard have a pact amongst themselves—no one who comes into this vineyard leaves unharmed. No one, no matter who they are.

Mind you, I said *tenants*. This is not their vineyard. They don't own this land. They're employees. The job description is simple: *tend and keep* the vineyard for a maximum harvest each season, a harvest of grapes that become wine; wine that would then be poured into barrels and jars; barrels and jars sold in the marketplace to be purchased for homes, for festivities, like when a father welcomes home his long lost son; or the wedding of a bride and groom. Remember our storyteller is the same man who turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee.

I've gotten ahead of myself. But there is the goal of the vineyard. That we must hold in our minds because that is the mind and heart of the winegrower. The mindset of his tenants, though, is vicious

and wicked. The tenants of this vineyard have conspired each season to keep the harvest for themselves *at all costs*.

Like any wine estate, they are not the only staff members in the winegrower's employ. The owner has other servants with different tasks. Where the tenants are charged with tending the vines to produce a harvest, another class of servants exist to *collect* the harvest on behalf of the winegrower.

And to trace the shocking sequence that follows in this story, we now need to locate *who* these characters represent. Some are obvious connections, but not all. Jesus tells this parable on Monday after Palm Sunday in the hearing of *many people*. It's evident from the final verse of Luke's account that the tenants represent Jerusalem's priesthood—namely the scribes, elders, and chief priests. Luke says, 'they perceived that they told this parable against them, but they feared the people.' People who less than 24 hours removed from this story's telling waved palm branches before Jesus saying 'hosanna to the Son of David.'

Who then are the servants of the winegrower, the servants who are beaten and abused before the owner sends his son? Here we have no doubt who the servants represent—the prophets. Just before Jesus told this parable, Luke tells us our Lord questioned the elders and priests about the authority of John the Baptist. With spite in their hearts, all the people are convinced that John the Baptist was *a prophet*.

Let us extend this interlude within our story a bit further and remember John the Baptist. John the Baptist was not only a prophet, but in the words of our Lord, 'among those born of women there has arisen no one *greater* than John the Baptist.'¹ John always goes before Jesus to prepare the way. He is the greatest prophet of Israel before Jesus; he is also the last prophet to come.

Remember John's words that began this liturgical year, words we hear in Advent and Epiphany. When John appeared on the scene, he spoke as *a prophet to the crowds*, and to Pharisees and Sadducees, who represented the elders of Israel. And John exhorted them with the imagery of a vineyard. 'Bear fruit in keeping with repentance,' John said. Luke, like a true artisan, was planting seeds early in his Gospel so that they would be fulling grown when Jesus told the parable of the vineyard in his final days.

Not only did very, very few of Israel's priests heed the words of John the Baptist, they rejected John and treated him shamefully. They said he was possessed of a demon. John, of course, was martyred because he was a prophet. And the crowds said of John, *he was like the prophets of old*.

Section 2

And now we come inside the parable of the vineyard again with greater insight to the potency of its meaning. John was not only the final servant, the final prophet, coming to the Lord's vineyard looking for the harvest of love and righteousness. *He was a prophet like the prophets of old*. He came in a long succession of prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah who announced the Lord's desire for his vineyard—to produce a harvest of love for God and neighbor; a harvest of love and goodness that would become wine poured out and given to every household of Israel.

¹ Matthew 11.11

But no, the tenants said these treasures aren't leaving this vineyard. And neither will the owner's messengers, his servants, leave this vineyard. All the treasures of this vineyard—its soil, the choicest vine, the fruit grown on these vines—all these things were hoarded for the benefit of a few. The tenants rejected the purpose of the winegrower—to bring barrels and jars of wine to every household, rich and poor, every festival, every wedding.

Prophet after prophet had come announcing the whole purpose of Israel's covenant, commandments, and scriptures; her liturgies, rituals, and sacrifices, her calendar and festivals; her temple and her holy city, Jerusalem. At the heart of every gift was the desire for a harvest of love for God above all, and love for every neighbor. Love given away and poured out.

Finally the son comes to his vineyard on behalf of his father. This is their land, their estate, their vines. The appearance of the son does not produce fear or dread. No, their conspiracy reaches its dark climax. The tenants fulfill a prophecy after they had assaulted the prophets. When they see the son in the vineyard, they become the conspirators of Psalm 2. They set themselves against the Lord and his anointed Son saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.'²

The Harvest of Love

No longer content to tend the vines, they want full possession, full ownership of this vineyard. All this beauty, this goodness, this wealth, it is for ourselves; it stays here. And so the pact of no-one-leaves-the-vineyard unharmed escalates from wounding the prior servants to *killing* the son.

This crime, this atrocity, was foretold by the prophet too. The Lord sang through Isaiah long ago:

What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

He planted a vineyard to yield a harvest of grapes; grapes become wine; wine poured out on every household, for every festival, every wedding.

The wonder of this story is that the winegrower *will* receive the harvest of love he has sought for so long. When it did not come through the vine he planted, the harvest of love came through the blood of his son spilled on the ground.

Closing

And so, my brother and sister, remember the whole purpose of a vineyard—to bring a harvest of grapes, grapes become wine, wine poured out and distributed for many. All that we have inherited in the church—the Scriptures, the liturgy, and the creeds; the sacraments, the saints, and our spiritual gifts; all that we tend in our lives and hearts—by fasting, prayer, by the acts of repentance and acts of service; these have one purpose—to become a harvest of goodness and justice, mercy and compassion. From this harvest, our Lord can take the fruit of our repentance and make it into the wine of sacrificial love.

I close with St. Paul. St. Paul the converted Pharisee. St. Paul's life had been an enacted parable of a wicked tenant, killing the servants of God in the vineyard of the Lord. But after he came to worship

² Psalm 2.3

the Lord Jesus whom he had persecuted, Paul became consumed with the very same love of the Son whose blood was shed outside the vineyard. We heard Paul say earlier in Philippians that he wanted to 'share his sufferings and become like Christ in his death.'³ Paul would be poured out like a drink offering, being martyred for the sake of Christ in Rome. But there is one word he wrote to the Romans that astonishes me, where one can hear Paul *did* possess the love of Christ for those who would harm him.

In Romans 9, St. Paul the Pharisee wrote of all those in Israel who rejected the Lord Jesus. God adopted Israel as his own, gave them the glory, the covenants, the law, the worship, the promises, the patriarchs. In other words, leased to them all the treasures of his vineyard. And in the face of Israel's rejection of Christ, Paul said of his kinsmen, 'I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers.' What kind of love is this? The same kind of love that was spilled on the cross, when Christ became a curse for us so that the wine of the Kingdom could be poured out for all.

Lord, make my heart a chalice. Clear my soul from the wild grapes of self love. Bring forth the fruit of repentance that I cannot produce myself. And then transform that harvest into a new wine, a wine poured into the chalice of my heart; that I may be poured out as a sacrifice for you, and a gift of love for my brother and sister, and all for your glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ Philippians 3.10