

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
October 8, 2017

“What More is There to Do?”

*“... the kingdom of God will be taken away from you
and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.”*
Matthew 21:43

PRELUDE

How does it fair with us
as we tend the vineyard
that is our home?
How does it fair with us,
with what we have been
leased?
And if it doesn't fair well,
what more is there to do?

These thoughts have been swirling
in my head,
stirring my heart,
this past week, and thoughts
we might consider together
this morning.

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We have as our lesson this morning
a parable
as found in Matthew's gospel.
The parable, with slight variation,
is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
It pictures for us a vineyard,
lush and much loved,
thoughtfully well designed
by its owner.

The owner planted the vines.

The owner put up a fence,
protecting the plantings.
The owner invested in a wine press,
to process the forecasted
produce.
The owner built a watchtower,
a lofty perch, part of a security system,
from which to survey the crops,
to sound alarm if vineyard might
suffer exploitation from intruders.

It is said that watchtowers were generally
constructed of stones in the ancient world;
and that they typically consisted of two levels:
a lower level to serve as living quarters,
and an upper level, a platform from which to
eye the surrounding landscape.
If properly staffed, the watchtower
ensured 24-hour security.
The vineyard would have been vulnerable
to harmful wildlife: foxes, badgers, jackals
and the like; and to thieves,
intruders of a humankind.

The owner, according to the parable,
leases the land to tenants, who are
entrusted with its care.
The tenants are not reliable,
nor are they likeable.
They are a nasty, unscrupulous lot,
rebellious, wicked, greedy,
without conscience.
How do we see these tenants?

Scruffy? Unkempt? Rough around the edges ?

Or are they clean cut, wearing tailored shirts,
Hugo Boss suits, designer silk ties,
with matching pocket square;

fine cotton socks for Italian shoes,
and on the wrist, the latest Apple watch.
And always a flag on the lapel.

How do you see the tenants in the
vineyard? They passed whatever
background check the owner required.
They had some look, some measure
of appearance, to obtain the lease
the owner granted.

In the parable, time flies.
There comes **“the season of fruits”**
in the parable, a term lost in translation
one commentary points out,
and the owner sends representatives
to collect the fruit that is due. (Matthew 21:34).
The tenants, though, are not in such a mind.
They plot and scheme; indeed they withhold
what payment is required to fulfill the lease,
and they do so quite violently.

Scholars note the parable is an allegory,
a parable form not common in Jesus’ repertoire.
This suggests the early church fine tuned
a Jesus teaching, allegorized it and
embedded it in the church’s curriculum.

Bear with me on this – it is a fine point.
As an allegory – the owner is God;
the tenants represent Israel;
the servants sent to collect
are the prophets;
and the son is Jesus.
The tenant who reject divine diplomats,
are themselves rejected;
and the vineyard gets turned over to others,
who will comply rather than object
to what God desires.

The new tenants being
the church;
which in today's hearing,
would be us.

Let us be careful here;
this is not, I repeat, is not,
about God rejecting Jews,
favoring Christians,
which is a gross and inaccurate
interpretation of the text.
This is Christian literature composed and
conditioned in Jewish culture,
for a Jewish/Gentile people pledging allegiance
to the Lordship of Jesus, the Jew,
whom they professed Christ, the Anointed,
a people who understood themselves to be
entrusted with earthwise care in the vineyard,
and charged with the producing
the fruits desired by God.

(Forgive me such a long sentence.)

This is church literature designed to impeach,
to unsettle any people given responsibility in
positions of authority,
who may experience what the
temple priests and Pharisees are said
to have experienced in hearing this parable -
what we might call a "moment of identification."
**"Good gracious, I think he's
speaking about us."**

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It is rare that I don't wonder in entering
this sanctuary, what our Plymouth Church
ancestors were thinking when they embraced
the architects design.

The vaulted ceiling – eight ribs with
repeated pattern: vines laced and
entabled, with periodic grape clusters;
40 clusters of grapes in each rib.

At the very least, I imagine,
there is suggestion:
sanctuary is a vineyard of sorts;
sanctuary is entrusted to tenants;
tenants operate on the assumption that
what we have is on lease;
tenants have been charged:
pray and work hard within the vineyard
to maintain its design
and to produce its fruit.

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Vineyard.

It is such a rich biblical image,
a metaphor, both for peace and contentment,
but also for the people of God – **“I planted you
as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then
did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?
(Jeremiah 2:21).**

The parable of Jesus is directly
traceable to Isaiah 5; there
we read of the land being cleared,
and planted with choice vines,
there a watchtower built in the midst of it,
along with a wine vat.
It was planted with purpose to yield grapes,
but the fruit failed to materialize.

Isaiah 5 – we read of huge heartache;
Isaiah 5 – we read what the owner of the
vineyard desired from the

pleasant planting of people.
God **“desired justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!”** (Isaiah 5:7).

It is in Isaiah 5 that we read:
**“What more was there to do
for my vineyard
that I have not done for it?”**

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Two weeks ago, a Sunday afternoon,
Vida and I attended an event at the Fort Wayne Urban
League, entitled **“Concert Across America
to End Gun Violence.”** The west side ground
of the Urban League was filled with yellow
and blue placards signifying the lives lost to
gun violence in the Fort Wayne acre of God’s vineyard,
some 200 in number, the toll of the dead since 2012.

It was a gathering of the broken hearted.
Parents, grandparents, spoke.
One mother spoke of having lost her only
son, a 2015 honors grad of Wayne High School.
“He had a future,” she said, **“now I’m his only voice.”**

What more was there to do
for the vineyard,
that we have not done?

One grandmother spoke.
She carried a life-size, cardboard cut out
of her son; she had a few grandchildren
in tow. She shared that the cardboard cutout
bearing the image of her son resides in her home,
and that she can’t yet give it up. She pointed out
a granddaughter, who couldn’t have been

much more than 5-years old, who brings playmates into the house, and introduces them to her father. **“That’s my daddy,”** she tells her playmates.

What more is there to do
for the vineyard,
that we have not done?

It wasn’t a large gathering at the Urban League; most of those who showed were families living with the grief of having love ones untimely taken, denied their future by the peace we’ve made with gun infestation, and the fruits it produces.

I can’t but recall what Pope Francis has stated:

**We have perfected our weapons,
our conscience has fallen asleep,
and we have sharpened our ideas
to justify ourselves
as if it were normal, we continue to sow
destruction, pain, death.**

When will we arise and reject
the moral degeneration of our culture?

Mass killings in our culture have become what one commentator described, without delight, a tradition. They are, as interpreted in a blog by Bill O’Reilly, **“the price of freedom.”**

“American have the right to arm themselves ... even the loons” (the *LA Times*, Oct. 2, 2017; Jessica Roy reporting).

You begin to lose track of the places
and venues after a while:

Schools:

College campus, Virginia Tech, 32 student and teachers (2017),
12 in a high school (Columbine, CO, 1999);
26 in an elementary school (Sandy Hook, 2012).

Churches:

9 at Charleston (2015),
2 in Knoxville, a UU Church ('08)

Entertainment venues:

Nightclub -

49 in a nightclub (Orlando, 2016),
and now - in the span of 9 minutes,
58 dead - hundreds wounded -
at a country music festival (Las Vegas).

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Is there more to do
for the vineyard,
that we have not done?

I advise:
there is much more we can do.

- (1) we can call for repentance, and give no
excuse to the moral decay that has become
a towering weed in the vineyard; there is a
spiritual rot, decomposition, in the soul
of society that can't halt its own self-
destructive impulses.
- (2) we can take to task any politician
who says, now is not the time to talk public policy.
- (3) we can re-commit ourselves to basic
church teaching, grounded in part,
on the insights of our reformation ancestors.

I was spending time this week,
a default behavior when I'm overwhelmed,
with the Heidelberg Catechism (dates from 1563)
and its teaching on the commandments.

Commandment 6 - Thou Shalt not Kill,
is addressed in three different parts; the third
part poses the question:

Is it not enough that we do not kill,
as in murder another,
out of anger, envy, or desire for revenge?

The catechism is adamantly clear,
No, it is not enough simply for the Christian
 simply to refrain from killing
 and assume compliance with the law.
God doesn't simply say: do not.
God pushes us to do.

In tune with the catechism,
we pray for restraint,
and we pray also to be engaged in corrective
action to prevent harm to the neighbor we are
commanded to love.

We are good tenants when we prevent harm
to the neighbor we are commanded to love.

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Violence in the vineyard.

It was in Isaiah's vineyard;
in Matthew's gospel (see Matthew 11:12),
 in Jesus' parable;
and it lurks in our hearts
 as a threat to our peace.

What more can we do?

Let us pray to make glad the city
in which God tabernacles.
We can make glad the city,
loving Jesus, loving the people Jesus loves,
and resisting the violence
Jesus resisted.

Let us reckon: it was in a world quite like ours
that Jesus said: Take up your cross and follow me.

We aren't called to flee
the scene of the crime;
and we aren't called to protect only ourselves.

We are summoned to advance, to repair,
to be engaged in preventive ministry
for a common good.

Coretta Scott King said something
we ought to remember.

She was asked one time,
"What do you think about violence,
since your husband was assassinated?"
She gave a very profound answer.

"Violence is not just the killing of my husband.
Violence is denying kids education.
Violence is denying people healthcare.
Violence is denying people wages.
Violence is taking people's culture.
"Even an apathetic attitude
that doesn't address these
other forms of violence
is a form of violence."

This is what we resist, my friends.

Above all, let us resist
the apathetic attitude
that spells grief.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*