

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost-Proper 22-Year A-The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 10.8.23
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

What a wonderful parable for Stewardship kick-off Sunday, especially when the invitation for all of us here at St. A.'s during stewardship this year is to *Share the Joy*. That's our guiding theme! I looked high and low for the joy in this parable and have concluded that this is actually a parable about not sharing joy. Take a closer look. Right from the start, things begin to go sideways. The landowner plants a vineyard, puts a fence around it, builds a watchtower and goes away. Stories that begin with fences and watchtowers are a first heads up that the relationships in this place might not be grounded in trusting mutuality. And as the story unfolds with its cast of unsavory characters—an absent landowner, slaves, tenants, an heir who swoops in—the baked in tension and inequity in this small world erupt into violence. Killing begets more killing. And the mean-spiritedness extends out from the story, because when Jesus finishes telling this tale, he puts forth a question to all those listening: “When the owner discovers all that has been going on in his absence, what will he do to the tenants?” And all those listening give an equally joyless and punishing reply, “The owner will put those wretches to a miserable death.”

What on earth is going on here? It is tempting to say that this is one of those stories from our biblical tradition that is so out of our context that it doesn't apply to our lives. That Matthew wanted to increase the intensity and urgency of Jesus's message in this part of his gospel—Jesus is in Jerusalem, speaking to the most religious folks, the crucifixion looming ahead—so he's upping the tension, but that was then, this is now, so it doesn't offer anything to us. Most of all, it is tempting to say, Let's just ignore this unpleasant reading and focus on sharing the joy. And then I noticed something missing in this parable. And it gave me pause. Most of the parables we've heard over these months of Ordinary Time—and we've heard a lot—begin this way: Jesus said, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...” But not today, not with this one. Today, Jesus begins this way: “Listen to another parable.” And then, he proceeds, whether anyone wants to listen or not.

This is indeed a parable, but, per Jesus's introduction, it does not seem to be a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven, where we are invited to make sense of who the different characters represent: the point probably isn't to figure out how God might be an absent landowner, building fences and watchtowers, how Jesus might be an unsympathetic heir, with the rest of humanity cast as tenants and slaves. At the same time, I would not say it's a parable about the Kingdom of Earth, this world that we live in. By that I mean that it is not a parable about the way things *always* are. We are coming up on Indigenous Peoples Day and National Coming Out Day this week (marking twenty-five years since Matthew Shepherd was killed); we read the news and we well know that systems of inequity and exploitation and cruel mistreatment of others is the way things sometimes (even often) have been and sometimes (even often) still are, sometimes (even often) lasting for a very, very, very long time.

I don't think this is a parable about the way things *always* are or the way they will always be. It *is* a parable, perhaps, about amnesia. About what happens when everyone

connected with the vineyard has amnesia about what they are supposed to be about—planting and tending to the vines so that all grow and produce an abundance of grapes. What happens when God’s people have amnesia about the Ten Best Ways, as Godly Play refers to the Ten Commandments outlined in Exodus today. What happens when everyone has lost the plot of mutual care and the focus is on who’s superior to whom (the landowner, the heir, the tenants, the slaves, the land). What happens when God’s people do not remember that generous compassion and fierce justice are at the heart of God’s dream and when they flow like a mighty river, that is where joy is found.

Now, as someone who forgets things all the time, I want to affirm that amnesia and forgetfulness are two very different things! (Paul even affirms the process of forgetfulness in today’s excerpt from Philippians: “Forget what’s past and focus on the goal of love!”) Jesus seems to be speaking about the consequences of collective amnesia: what happens when there is no memory about love being at the center, love being the purpose, love being the heartbeat. The consequences of amnesia are quite serious, quite brutal according to the parable. I did not grow up learning about the Doctrine of Discovery. At its heart, it is a doctrine of amnesia. A doctrine that tried to erase the full dignity and belovedness of all people, all creatures, all of God’s creation.

I wonder if part of the intent of this parable today is for the hearers—who happen to be us this morning—to recoil from the world of this parable, of amnesia. It’s so stark, so clearly not a system that is life-giving. It’s designed, perhaps, to catch our attention, to maybe draw us back to Jesus, eager to hear more about the joyous way of the Kingdom or Community of Heaven. Tell us more about *that* community, Jesus, that you describe and invite us into each day, in so many ways. If sharing the joy of community is about caring, tending, providing, truth-telling, listening, repenting, mending, seeking, understanding, grieving, reconciling, healing, welcoming, offering, giving, loving, living with and for one another—and I might propose that that is a *beginning* definition—than help us see it and live it and be it and share it with one another.

If you missed NPR’s story last week on how churches are facing into the consequences of the Doctrine of Discovery and seeking new relationships with First Peoples, it’s well worth listening to. Episcopal Bishop Mary Crist is featured. Eleven years ago, Bishop Crist, an enrolled Blackfeet, preached at the Episcopal Church’s General Convention. In that sermon, she described some of what was going on in the little church where she had been assigned, just after being ordained. She described specific things—ministries, connections, relationships — all that was emerging in that place. Everything she talked about is very particular to that community, but it really is a parable about what happens when the people of God are open and attentive and intentionally taking a stance of wondering what is possible. It so reminded me of where we are, of all that is happening here, because at the end of the sermon, she said this:

It all looks a bit messy...And yet, people tell me they are fascinated to see what is coming next. I tell them we are listening to hear what the Holy Spirit has planned for us. We know it will be filled with life, and it will be filled with the love of Christ. We are becoming a new spiritual family—brothers and sisters in the faith...we are the early church resurrected. What I have learned from this experience is awesome. From what people tell me, the [church] is dying, but from what I see, the church is being reborn. We

are being called by the Spirit into something new. I am standing in the middle of a whirlwind. I can feel the wind on my face. It blows my hair around. I can hear the Eagle's call. It is exhilarating. It is unpredictable. It is messy...yet it is God...and it is good."

This is the beginning of our fall stewardship season. Every year, as a community, we re-gather and re-focus on who we are and what we are about, this remarkable outpost of the Community of Heaven, as Susan Gaumer said in a sermon just about a year ago. Every fall it starts again, this re-envisioning and building and forming together. This community is not the same this year as it was last year. We are not even the same as we were last week! We need the unique and diverse gifts of all because what we will offer and do together this year is not the same as what took place last year. The wind is blowing and we are listening and the Holy Spirit is afoot, calling us in joy into new life. A story without joy ultimately has no power because we have been fearfully and wonderfully made for joy, with joy, by the Joy of all creation.