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Our northern hemisphere is in the full-throttled advance of a school year well begun, autumn leaves are beginning their annual exhibition of color and the Christmas season is still blessedly distant. Everything is in full gear. In contrast, the church year has started down-shifting toward the end of the year. The readings begin to sound an apocalyptic tone as the focus turns toward the end-times. The parables and stories Matthew will tell us from now through November are all situated in the last week of Jesus' life, a detail that tells us to listen to them with a particular urgency.

Today's parable of the landowner and tenants used a situation familiar to the audience. A wealthy landowner wanted his due, the tenants rebelled and got the crazy idea that if they eliminated the owner's servants and son, they would be the winners taking all. Jesus wove this tale as an indictment of religious leaders who rebelled against God and ignored all the servants sent to call them to task. We can easily apply Jesus' parable to church and state leaders, critiquing their lack of faithful stewardship. But, like it or not, using a parable to point a finger at another is a self-righteous distortion of Jesus' message. He wouldn't tolerate it from us anymore than he did from his contemporaries.

If we have the courage to listen for a Gospel message and not just seek self-affirmation, we must ask how this applies to us and not just to authorities. Suppose we listen to Isaiah's song of the vineyard as a depiction of God's vantage point on human life and the earth we have been given. We hear of God's tenderness for all of creation, the loving gaze with which God watches over evolution with all its green growth and painful transformations. We then hear of God's heartbreak. The wild grapes of bitterness and discord sprout where all had been designed to bring forth fruit to transform into the good wine of joy and harmony.

When we listen to the parable of the mutinous tenants, instead of thinking of "those people," suppose we heard it addressed to all of us as the stewards of our earth. What would happen if we interpreted this parable through the lens of Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home"?

Francis tells us that God's vineyard, our sister Earth, is crying out to us "because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her" (LS #2). There can hardly be a more direct way of implicating us as tenants just like those in Jesus' parable.

Jesus told the story of tenants who had forgotten who they were. Instead of acting like servants or collaborators with the owner, they decided that they should be the sole masters, beholden to no one, privileged to eliminate anyone who got in their way. Francis describes our misguided understanding of our relationship to the Earth saying, "We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life" (#2).

Francis warns us that we have disrupted the harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation "by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations" (#66). As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual (#66). When Jesus asked the chief priests and Pharisees what the owner would do to his tenants, they answered, "He will put those wretched men to a wretched death and lease his vineyard to other tenants." Jesus softened their verdict. He said, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit."

Jesus didn't call for the elimination of the rebellious tenants, but for others to take their place and do what needed to be done. Francis tells us: "The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home" (#13).

This week's readings ask us how we are tending God's creation. In his September 1, 2015 letter establishing a "World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation," Francis tells us that today's ecological crisis is a summons to profound interior conversion. Calling us to become a people who produce the fruit of the kingdom of God, he says: "Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience." There is still time.

ISIAH 5:1-7

If we wanted to stage this selection from Isaiah in three movements, we could start with a single folk singer tuning her guitar and preparing to sing a ballad to the audience. The mellow tune and gentle picking will bring the audience into the performer's mood and her fondness for the one of whom she sings. She sings about her friend, the owner of a vineyard.

This woman loves her friend, and her song conveys every bit of the owner's tenderness for the vineyard. We can almost see him picking up clods, smelling them and letting the dirt fall through his fingers. We see him working his parcel, choosing the vines and preparing the press that would allow the grapes to yield their juice. Every moment the owner spent in the vineyard gave him pleasure; he loved the vines and dreamt of what they would produce.

The second verse of the song morphs into a lament. The singer doesn't even get through the whole verse before her friend appears on stage to sing about his heartbreak. His song seeks no vengeance. With no emotional energy left, he weeps, "Let it fall to ruin! I can't care anymore, I could not have cared anymore!"

In the third movement, the spotlight fades and a chorus appears. Every member looks directly at the audience and sings the final lines: "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel ... he looked ... for justice, but hark, the outcry!"

Philosophers invented the idea that God is beyond emotion. Our Scriptures give us quite a different image. The Book of Isaiah is full of rich depictions of the God who desires everything good for humanity: rich foods, a harvest of justice, life in abundance. The one thing today's selection leaves out is the fact that the divine vineyard owner does not give up on the people. While there are moments of ruin and drought, God also tells Isaiah, "Give comfort to my people" (40:1).

As today's Gospel and Eucharistic Prayer 4 remind us, God offers the covenant and invites us to hope for salvation from our unfruitful folly.

PHILIPPIANS 4:6-9

Winding toward the close of his letter to the Philippians, Paul makes recommendations to the community. Our selection skips the opening invitation to rejoice in the Lord (4:4), lending a more solemn tone to Paul's instruction. Saying "have no anxiety" could make Paul sound either like Pollyanna or someone unconcerned about the real world. Paul is in neither of those camps.

Juxtaposing worry and prayer, Paul describes distinct orientations to life. One can move through life like C. S. Lewis' character Puddleglum, a delightful creature uncannily capable of perceiving a motive for pessimism in every bright opportunity. That sort of anxiousness comes from the dual assumptions that "I will have to handle everything that will go wrong," and, "Just about everything is on a negative trajectory."

Paul's antidote to this is prayer, and he uses four different words to describe it. He tells his people to turn to God with prayer, i.e., speech addressed to God. While that seems self-evident, Paul reminds the people that they really are invited to communicate directly with God. They shouldn't act as if God were in the distant heavens watching over all. Prayer expresses their direct relationship with God. It requires no intermediary, no sacrifice or payment, nothing more than the willingness to enter into communication with God.

He tells them to go to God with petition, the admission that they are in need. The third word Paul uses for prayer is thanksgiving (*eucharistia*). Their prayer of gratitude is a joyful admission that they have received more than they deserved, that God is loving and generous. Finally, Paul refers to prayer as a request, the explicit mention of their particular desire or need.

Paul is not outlining an introduction to modes of prayer, but encouraging his community to understand that prayer is not simply an activity, but an approach to life. *In everything* they are to remember God's presence and communicate with God, expressing their hopes and needs. Voicing their gratitude, they will fortify their faith. Remembering all that God has done is the surest way to move forward in trust.

A life of prayer brings "the peace of God that surpasses all understanding." Paul's next verses invite the community to contemplate what he has told them so that it may shape their life. To the extent that they are grounded in prayer, they will be able to care deeply about all that happens, and yet not be anxious.

MATTHEW 21:33-43

Jesus commands our attention saying, "Hear another parable." He spins the tale of a landowner with rebellious tenants. The more the owner seeks his due, the more vicious the tenants' response. Some of the details of his story come directly from Isaiah 5. But Jesus reworks it for his own purposes.

Last week's parable about the father and sons rained on the religious leaders' showy parades. This week's parable unleashed thunder and lightning. When Jesus challenged the leaders to write the end of the story, they condemned the tenants even though they realized that they were the ones implicated. Jesus softened their sentence by telling them, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit."

The situation was embarrassing for the leaders; the angrier they got, the more they were admitting that they understood that the evil tenants represented them and Jesus was the son. So, they immediately started plotting against Jesus. (See the concluding verses of Matthew 21:44-45.)

This parable has a history of tragic misinterpretation. It has been used as a pretext for condemning Jewish people while raising up the supposed Christians as God's chosen ones. To deal with that sort of distortion of the Gospel, we should follow this rule of thumb: If one of Jesus' parables does not call us to conversion, we haven't yet understood it. Jesus used parables to shock people into conversion. They aren't puzzles to be understood, but calls to action crafted to make us uncomfortable enough to change our ways.

Matthew placed this teaching time in the last days of Jesus' life. Each event of that final week sharpened the lines between his disciples and those who chose to be his enemies. Jesus used this parable to retell salvation history. He reminded his hearers that God had sent prophetic messengers, to call the chosen people to task, to demand that they answer for the responsibility they had been given. Time and again, people with power had ignored God, rejecting and mistreating the emissaries. Jesus slipped another passion prediction into this parable, not so subtly presenting himself as God's son — the last one sent by the owner of the vineyard. The angry listeners, as if on autopilot, plotted to be rid of him.

We know the rest of the story. But that was then. What about today?

When we read this parable in the light of our world situation and *Laudato Si'*, we find ourselves in the sandals of the tenants. Pope Francis reminds us that God has entrusted this Earth to us. Francis could have been writing a commentary on this parable when he said that our role in the world must be understood as one of stewardship (LS #116). Francis quotes Pope St. John Paul II saying: "Once the human being declares independence ... and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble, for instead of carrying out his role as a cooperator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature" (#117).

When we read Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants as a commentary on human responsibility for our Earth and all its peoples, we find ourselves feeling less righteous and much more challenged. None of us can read Francis' encyclical and feel vindicated. Whether as stewards of the Earth or spokespersons for the world and her most vulnerable creatures, we are called to continue to produce the fruits the Creator hopes to see from us.

Francis tells us: "As Christians, we are also called to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbors on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet" (#9). Being stewards of creation requires that we approach our Earth as a source of communion or hear the judgment: "It will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit."

Planning: 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's readings offer us two different perspectives. The first reading and the Gospel issue stern warnings to those who are not acting justly as God commands. The second reading emphasizes the positive side, calling us to focus our attention on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious."

The challenge of the first and Gospel readings is a call to justice. The song of the vineyard in Isaiah ends by saying that God "looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed! for justice, but hark, the outcry!" The Gospel parable ends with this warning: "Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit."

Planners might spend some time together discussing how these warnings apply to our contemporary society and institutions. Might God say of our world today, "I looked for judgment but saw only bloodshed; I looked for justice but heard only the outcry of the poor and dispossessed?" Are we, as a local church, producing good fruit in our current crises, both locally and around the world?

There is always hesitation about applying the word of God to current social and political affairs, because it is highly likely that some in the parish will disagree vehemently when they feel their views or their livelihood is threatened by talk of social justice. But can we really justify keeping silent on critical issues of our time because some will disagree?

How we approach such preaching and teaching is important, of course. Little is to be gained in most parish situations by issuing thundering condemnations. That approach will likely turn off more people than it motivates for good. Hard issues must be confronted honestly, but they can also be addressed with understanding and charity toward those who may not yet have grasped the moral issues at stake.

Perhaps the approach of our second reading might be useful. We can confront almost any issue by highlighting its negative aspects, but we can also address it by offering better alternatives to the current way of thinking and acting. Paul's call to think about what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely and gracious could serve as a guide for preachers and for those who compose petitions this week. Focusing on the loveliness of what God created might better motivate some people to care for creation, rather than focusing on the pollution and destruction occurring all around the planet. Remember the old adage: You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

However you decide to approach justice issues, what is most important is that we help people see how the word of God calls us to action today as much as it did in biblical times.

Prayers: 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Judeo-Christian history and today's readings remind us again that being called to be God's people is a gift and a privilege. But it is also a responsibility that comes with expectations. Even in difficult times, we hear that what is offered to us is not to be squandered. We are free, of course, to respond however we choose. But if we accept our calling, it comes with a price. Being chosen, being Christian — as with all relationships — is not for the faint-hearted.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you told us how God showed his love for us: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you came as God's greatest gift to us: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you showed us that God has expectations of us: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider We pray now for our many needs and the needs of the whole world.

Minister That we may have the courage to act on Paul's words to give witness by lives that are true, just, gracious, honorable ...we pray,

- For those throughout the world who suffer for their faith ... we pray,
- For those who falsely portray Christianity as a source of material success ... we pray,
- For those who have never felt gifted by God or anyone else ... we pray,
- For those awaiting a good harvest and those whose harvests are disappointing or disastrous ... we pray,

- For those who are responsible for the future of our country, our environment and our safety ... we pray,
- For those who need public assistance of any kind, and for those who have been denied assistance ... we pray,
- For the sick and the dying, the discouraged and those in need in this community ... we pray,

Presider God, gracious Giver, we thank you for calling us to be your people. Help us to be faithful in our commitment to you and to one another, and forgive us when we fail. Strengthen our sense of responsibility that comes with the gift you have given us. We humbly ask this the name of your beloved Son, Jesus. Amen.

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