

October 4, 2020 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80:7-15  
Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

[Quote from Rabbi Arthur Waskow from "The Sukkah of Shalom" as found in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*, page 106-107. Reflections from David Lose and Davidlose.net from either 2014 or 2011, and postings for 10-8-17. My own sermon from 10-8-17.]

**Please, join me in prayer: May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Holy God. Amen.**

**Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus.**

**Tending the times.**

That's what I would title this sermon.

**The last couple sentences of today's gospel** give a clue to the *times* that Matthew was thinking about:

"they wanted to arrest him, they feared the crowds."

Hearing this in early October, far from our Lenten and Holy Week observation,

hearing just this standalone parable

we might forget that chapter 21 of Matthew *begins* with Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

You know the story.

Today's parable is on the heels of the first Palm Sunday, right about Monday of Holy Week.

We know what's coming.

As Matthew chooses to order his telling of the Gospel,

*after* riding into Jerusalem and *before* this short string of challenging parables,

Jesus goes to the temple and turns over the tables of money changers, coins skittering all directions.

The leaders of the temple, the chief priests, the pharisees, the scribes, the elders, they must have been

feeling the tension: How can they stop this fellow? What authority does he *think* he has?

In turn, this pointed parable, and the others in this challenging string, are directed right to these religious

leaders, not to the hungry, hurting crowds on the hillside, but to the leaders.

Those are the times for Jesus.

**"There is this man who owns a vineyard,"** Jesus tells them.

He planted and fenced and dug and built and finally leased it to some tenants.

His tenants run the vineyard and he sends slaves to collect the rent, and they are met with violence.

Then he tries again, sending more slaves, and they get more violence.

Then he tries a third time, this time sending his son, his heir, and still more violence, more greed, more death.

Violence and violence and more violence.

**Jesus explains this parable with a question**, something like, “When the owner returns, what will he do with the tenants?”

In the gospel of Mark and the gospel of Luke, it’s a rhetorical question, and Jesus supplies the answer.

But when Matthew tells the story, Jesus does the asking and the Pharisees do the answering.

The response is especially harsh, particularly violent: “He’ll put those wretches to a miserable death.”

I always cringe at that line.

Violence, it seems, begets still more violence.

**Matthew was writing and compiling his Gospel for a Jewish Christian community.**

Isn’t it interesting that throughout this Gospel, the Jewish religious leaders are treated especially harshly?

In Matthew’s time, this little community of Jesus’ followers was fledgling, rag tag.

This pointy parable was a way of giving it back to the establishment with particular nuance.

Through the years and still today, this passage is often read against the Jewish community, against our

Jewish kin and neighbors, the fuel for yet more anti-Semitic rhetoric and anti-Semitic violence.

Truth is, historians suspect that the stress on Jesus’ minority community was immense in those times.

Seen through Matthew’s lens, some of these followers of Jesus’ way may have been considering returning

to the tradition of their childhood, so Jesus saw the religious leaders as competition, as a threat.

Perhaps that is why the language Matthew uses, in his time, is so very harsh, so violent.

Trouble is, as David Lose wrote, this fledgling community wasn’t fledgling for long.

Very quickly it (we) grew up and gained power, and aligned with the empire’s powers.

Now this reading just looks like awkward self-vindication over and over and over again.

To be clear: for too long holy scripture has been used as a weapon, as violence—no more.

**So, tending the times.**

We’ve named the disturbing violence of this parable, the way it’s been used throughout the years.

But I’m curious about the fruits we’re called to tend in our times.

I’m curious about how we, who are not the landowners, but rather the tenants, can best do the tending.

**Maybe a clue here is that simple truth: We are not the landowners, we’re the tenants.**

We’re the stewards, called to take care, not to own, but to take care:

to take care of the earth and it’s creatures,

to take care of one another,

to value life—in sickness and in health—with dignity, with compassion,

to be beloved community.

In Isaiah's vineyard, the exploitation of the poor is the wild grapes that the prophet describes. It's tempting in times like ours—so divisive, so painful, so confusing, frankly, maddening—it's tempting to read this passage as us and them: we tend the good grapes, they tend the wild. I'm not sure that it's so clear—in fact, I'm pretty sure it's not. While those religious leaders oppressed the poor and created an onerous system, in our times we needn't look far for onerous systems and burdensome practices: a broken immigration process, families separated, labor exploited for the sake of cheap food and clothing, for the simple fear of the other. In every direction, it seems, the grapes are wild.

**And then I look more closely, and I listen again to your stories:**

One of you told me this week about the calls you're making for Faith In Minnesota. You said, "I can be really anxious in these times, or I can do something about it." The Faith in Minnesota callers ask questions like, "What is important to you in this election?" These calls have a simple and profound way of inviting fellow voters to reflect on their decisions, their vote. That's tending the times in a beautifully relational and local way. That's bearing good fruit.

**Yesterday's gun buyback at Shiloh Temple** in north Minneapolis is another space of tending the times.

"Unburden Yourself" the signs said. The gun violence and killing has been intense these months. This is one way to lessen the number of guns on the streets, to lessen the number of people being killed, or killing another and living with the consequences. No questions asked, you could turn in guns of all sorts. Tending the times.

**Esther XXXXXX this week told me of her recent visit with her older sister Marilyn.**

Marilyn died yesterday, she was 88 years old. In that precious last visit Marilyn said to Esther: "Keep it up, just like I was doing, keep it up."

**Friends, there is something about knowing our role, and keeping on.**

When anxiety is so strong—and I'm thinking especially of the politics and the grief of these days,  
when division could crack us wide open,  
when fear breeds violence,  
when hatred could divide our souls, let alone our families and nation,  
there something essential about confessing how we too get stuck,

how we too sow hatred, if only in our own minds, we know wild grapes.  
Beloved ones, tending the times includes naming this struggle, and then going further.

**Today, October 4<sup>th</sup>, is the feast of St. Francis of Assisi.**

In the spirit of Francis, lover of creatures and critters, the blessing of animals is often done around this time.  
We'll bless animals later in today's service.

The images that we have of Francis nearly always show him arms outstretched with birds alighting and  
creatures gathered at his feet.

Back in the early 1200s, Francis, who had been born into wealth and privilege, turned the values of the  
world on their head with a subversive trust in God.

He lifted up the poor and the sick. He took on poverty.

He created communities of non-violence that crossed lines of gender and made a place for brother sun and  
sister moon, indeed, the whole cosmos—in the 1200s.

**Tending the times.**

Friday evening was the start of the Jewish Festival of Sukkot, or shelters

Rabbi Arthur Waskow writes of the Sukkah:

“In 2001, just a few weeks after the 9/11 attacks, the Jewish community celebrated the festival of Sukkot.

Many did so by building a *sukkah*—a fragile hut with a leafy roof, the most vulnerable of houses.

Vulnerable in time, since it lasts for only a week each year.

Vulnerable in space, since its roof must be not only leafy

but leaky enough to let in the starlight and gusts of wind and rain.”

Rabbi Waskow goes on to describe our human tendency to seek out security of all sorts.

“But,” he writes, “the sukkah reminds us: We are all vulnerable.”

“The sukkah not only invites our bodies to become physically vulnerable, but also invites our minds to  
become vulnerable to new ideas.”

We can learn from this practice of our kin: leaning into vulnerability with openness, with community,  
with trust, with faith

**Dear friend in Christ,** the Psalmist cries, Restore us, O God.

That's my prayer: Restore us, O God.

In these broken times, when it feels the world is spinning out of control,  
may the very life of Jesus Christ and power of the Gospel promises  
free you to trust, an[d] tether you to hope. Amen