

## Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A October 2, 2011

Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Philippians 4:6-9; Matthew 21:33-43

### The Vineyard of the Church

October 1<sup>st</sup>—it's Fall, a time for reaping what has been sown; a time to harvest good fruits and preserve some of them for the next year. Last week, Jenni and I collected our first harvest of honey from our two bee hives—135 pounds. And last Saturday I went down, along with my son, my son-in-law, and a group of our friends, to the California Wine Grape Store in Detroit and brought home 2400 pounds of good grapes. We crushed those grapes on Tuesday and they are now fermenting on our front porch. Tomorrow everyone will come back and we will put the fermented grapes in the wine press and everyone will take their juice home as it continues its final transition to drinkable wine.

This is the time of the year for wine making and so it is appropriate that we have two readings today about vineyards and winemaking. But neither of our stories ends well. In the first, from the prophet Isaiah, the vineyard itself represents the house of Israel. The Israelites are God's chosen people. God has taken care of them and given them great gifts, but they responded by being unfaithful. They produced wild grapes instead of good fruit. Isaiah warns the people of the judgment and punishment that will result; that their kingdom will be destroyed. And indeed that is what happened when the people did not turn back to God—the temple was destroyed and the people were sent into exile. The vineyard was in a state of ruin.

In our gospel passage we hear Jesus addressing the chief priests and elders. He has travelled to Jerusalem for what He knew would be the last week before His passion and death. In the preceding days He had entered Jerusalem on a donkey to shouts of: *“Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest.”* But this was not what the chief priests and elders wanted to hear. Jesus knew they would reject Him. He knew their intentions, and so He presented them with the parable of the wicked tenants. In hindsight now, we can see the meaning of the parable, the meaning that the chief priests and elders did not understand then because of the hardness of their hearts.

In the parable, the vineyard once again represents Israel. Once again God has spared no effort in building up his chosen vineyard. The wicked tenants in the parable represent the priests and elders that God has entrusted to tend the vineyard. The servants that were sent to collect the harvest, but who were instead beaten, represent the prophets that God sent to correct the people, but had been rejected, beaten, and killed instead. And, of course, the landowner's son is Jesus. Through His parable, Jesus confronted the chief priests and elders with the fact that, like the landowner's son, He too would be rejected and be taken outside the city walls and killed.

We have today two vineyard stories that foreshadowed events that came to pass. And we can look at and appreciate the historical symbolism of the stories, but that doesn't do us much good for showing us how we should go forward. So we need to look a little further. The final words of Jesus in our gospel passage are: *“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.”*

The kingdom of God belongs to people that will produce its fruit. And so we need to reflect on whether we produce good fruit through our words and actions. One of my friends, who used to make wine with us, tried growing his own grapes. All summer long, he would give us updates

at work on how well his vines were doing. He lived on a lake and could give his little vineyard copious supplies of water. His vines were very lush and rich with foliage but, when it came time for harvest, there was almost no fruit. He was very disappointed. And as I told the story to a Romeo fruit farmer one day at church, he quickly diagnosed the problem as lack of pruning. All the energy from the vines went into producing leaves instead of good fruit. The next year, Dave pruned his vines appropriately and was rewarded with a bountiful harvest.

Jesus tells us that He is the vine and we are the branches. We need to stay connected to the vine or we will wither. We need to have a strong sacramental and prayer life to keep that connection. And sometimes we need to undergo a little pruning just like my friend's vines to help us produce fruit. We need to look at our lives and see what is good and what is bad; what we do that produces fruit and what we do that is just for show, to make ourselves look good in the eyes of others. We need to cut away those things in our daily lives, those near occasions of sin, that cause us to grow wildly and out of control. We need to fast and make sacrifices to grow in a disciplined way. We need to make some cuts—cuts which may seem painful—to reach our full potential, and produce as much fruit as possible for our King. Today was the memorial of St. Therese of Lisieux, the little flower. She can be a wonderful example. She became a saint simply by living her little way; bringing no attention to herself.

But fortunately, we do not work alone as individuals, we work together as members of the Church to do God's will, not for show. The Church is the new vineyard. We need to be active in the Church and pray for its health. And so I would like to conclude with a passage from today's responsorial psalm, Psalm 80. Verses 15-20 can be considered a prayer of sorts asking for God's blessing upon us.

***“Turn again, LORD of hosts; look down from heaven and see; Attend to this vine, the shoot your right hand has planted. Those who would burn or cut it down—may they perish at your rebuke. May your help be with the man at your right hand, with the one whom you once made strong. Then we will not withdraw from you; revive us, and we will call on your name. LORD of hosts, restore us; let your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.”***

**Deacon Joe Hulway**