

A Feast for the World

[Matthew 21:33-46]

"The Stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone..."

K Karpen, Sunday, October 2, 2005
Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
World Communion Sunday

[Matthew 21:33-46, "A The Feast for the World," K Karpen, October 2, 2005]

"Therefore I tell you, 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

Oh, what a text for World Communion Sunday! I wonder what perverse twist of the lectionary brings us this jolly parable on the one day a year that churches flung far around the world and far across the theological and political spectrum try to sit down together, figuratively speaking, for our common meal! For that matter, it's a heck of a text for any Sunday.

A person plants a vineyard, gives it the means to produce wine, including a wine press, and sets up some protection for it: a watchtower and a fence. But that protection doesn't protect it from the people inside: the tenants who think they're entitled to run it as they see fit. The tenants who forget whose vineyard it really is. Which actually makes it a perfect parable for World Communion Sunday.

It's traditional, in the church, to think of this as a parable about Israel. In Biblical terms, Israel is the vineyard of God; lovingly planted, easily gone astray. In the church we have liked to assume that the bad tenants of the parable are the Pharisees and the chief priests, who opposed what Jesus was trying to do & teach & say. That self-serving interpretation has worked for the church for 2,000 years. Even though the church called itself the new Israel and the true Israel, it rarely felt tempted to turn a self-critical eye to the question, "How are we doing with the vineyard?"

How are we doing with the vineyard God has entrusted to us? How are we caring for this vineyard God loved into existence with every fiber and thought? How are we tending a vineyard that has grown to include two billion souls whose task and calling is to care as much for the other four-plus billion with whom we share a planet as we do for ourselves?

Those are the questions we in the church might ask ourselves as we get ready to sit down together and share the fruit of the vine and a taste of the harvest. God has done God's part. God has provided us a vineyard. God has given us the means to produce the fruits of the kingdom. God has protected us from the ravages of the world. But all that protection won't protect us from us, if we fail in our responsibility to the one who owns the vineyard.

I love the church. I really do. You gotta love the church. There's so much to love about the church.

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Six weeks ago my family and I were worshiping in a little church in the mountains of Mexico built in the 1500s, built with narrow slits for windows to protect the Spanish priests & monks from the people outside, and now filled to the rafters with indigenous people of the Mexican mountains singing, praying, laughing, & eating, like we do here.

On Sundays, we heard the same scriptures there that you were reading here. And at the end of Mass, people broke out pots of atole and coffee and baskets of bread & tamales that would give our best coffee hours a run for the money. And I had an amazing feeling sitting there and realizing that this same moment of caring and sharing was going on in millions of little communities around the globe. Millions of little communities like Tepoztlan, Mexico. Millions of little communities like New York City. At its best, our global church is always local.

At its best, our global church is always cultivating the vineyards in millions of neighborhoods and barrios and parishes and towns. Harvesting a few grapes of love & justice in all the God-forsaken places God never forsakes. John Wesley always said "The world is our parish." But nobody lives in the world, and that knowledge kept Wesley on horseback seven days a week sharing the Gospel with people in the coal fields of the British midlands and London and Liverpool slums. As Wesley would say, "The church lives where people live."

And so the church continues to labor in the vineyards God has planted. But the question we're faced with this week is, how faithful are you and I being to the trust placed in us by the owner of the vineyard. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, "We have this treasure, but it's in earthen vessels." We have the sweet wind of the Gospel, but it's carried in us jugs made of clay.

Are we doing OK? Are we doing the best we can? Are we doing as God expects? Caring for the wine of the Gospel with integrity and compassion is difficult anywhere in the world. I think it is especially difficult in this land at this particular time.

There's work to be done in the vineyard. You and I live and labor in a city where the injustices of our global economic system are visible to anyone who wants to look. New York County, the island of Manhattan, has the greatest income disparity of any county in the US. The wealthiest 20% of us make 52 times what the poorest 20% of us do, which makes us similar to most of the third world. What unpleasant truths would a Katrina-like disaster reveal here?

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There's work to be done in the vineyard. And in our nation. I don't even know where to start. It's become almost common over the past decade to refer to the US as a Christian nation. And, scary as that phrase may sound to some of us, it's true statistically. About 85% of us call ourselves Christian; compare that with the 77% of people in Israel who consider themselves Jewish.

But what does that mean to us? Do we know what being Christian is? Bill McKibben pointed out recently that three-quarters of Americans believe that the Bible teaches: "God helps those who help themselves." Who actually wrote that? Ben Franklin. It may be wise, but it's about as far from Biblical teaching as you can get.

The Bible teaches us to care for our neighbor as if she were ourselves. The Bible teaches us to help the stranger, the widow, the orphan. To love our enemies. The Bible claims God judges us by what we do for the hungry, the naked, the prisoner, not what we do for ourselves.

There's work to be done in the vineyard. And on the global scale. Here again, where do we begin? We see that religion has become a force that divides us. How odd. Religion means to re-connect, from re-ligare. To connect with God. To connect with each other. Religion at its heart. Religion at its most authentic is never about what divides us. It's always about that which deeply connects us. At our root. At our seed. The compassion of our common creator.

But there is work to be done in that vineyard! Peter Arnett tells a story of something that happened to him 4 or 5 years ago when he was at CNN. He says, "Last week I was on the West Bank, and a bomb went off, a terrorist bomb went off. Bodies were flying through the air. There was blood all over. A man came running up to me, holding in his hands a girl that was badly wounded, bloody from head to toe. The man holding this little girl in his arms said to me, "Mister, the soldiers have sealed off the area. They won't let anybody in and anybody out. If I don't get her to a hospital, she is going to die. You can see that—that she is going to die if I don't get her out of here. You're the press; you can get us out of the lines. Please, please will you help?"

..."What could I do? I put them in the back of the car, I covered them with a blanket, and we made our way through the lines. And on the way to Tel Aviv, he kept on saying, "Go faster, please, mister, go faster," and then he started moaning, 'I'm losing her, I'm losing her, I'm losing her!'"

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..."When we got to the hospital, we rushed the girl into the operating room, dropped her on the table, came out, and sat on the bench outside the operating room totally dissipated and exhausted because of the tension that we had just been through. I was taking a deep breath when the doctor came out of the room and said, 'She's dead.' The man convulsed in tears. He screamed and he cried, and I put my arm around him and tried to comfort him. I said to him, 'I don't know what to say. I don't have any children. I don't know what it's like to lose a daughter.'"

"The man looked up at me and said, 'Oh that little girl isn't my daughter. That Palestinian girl is not my daughter. I am a Jewish settler.' And then he said, "But maybe the time has come when all of us must learn to look on every child as a son and as a daughter. Maybe the day has come when we must discover what it means to belong to God's family."

There's work to be done in the vineyard. A week from Thursday, our church is hosting a break-fast for our friends from B'Nai Jeshrun and from the American Sufi Muslim Association. It's Yom Kippur, and the Jews will be fasting. It's Ramadan, and the Muslims will be fasting. What will the Methodists be doing? What we do best, cooking! There's work to be done in the kitchen as well as the vineyard.