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The Vineyard of Our Hearts



Sunday, September 27, 2026
Matthew 21:23 - 32

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Amen.

I have to say I'm a little disappointed that this reading was not chosen as a favorite Bible story by anyone during the Youth Message, which doesn't mean it's not a great story.

In the ancient, ancient commentaries on this story, the church fathers and mothers talk about the vineyard as being the work of justice. And the reason they come to this conclusion is because they're thinking of a passage from Isaiah. I'm just going to paraphrase it. There Isaiah says, Israel is a vineyard. I went to the land and I expected justice. Instead, I found bloodshed. I went expecting righteousness. Instead, I heard a cry.

For Jesus to share a story of the invitation of people to come into the vineyard to do its good work is an invitation to all of his followers, to all of the people of God, to come into the work of justice, to do the work of justice. And yet it seems that perhaps those who are closest in their calling to understanding God's movements in the world, those who knew the law and Torah most intimately, seem not to have heeded the call to come into the vineyard and do the work of justice.

For me, this parable raises an amazing question. Why is it that the chief priests and the scribes, those who are in the temple doing the great work of God, the religious leaders of

that time, why are they left calculating and ultimately cannot say the truth that they seem to see?

Why is it the tax collectors and the prostitutes, those who seem so far from the law, living not within the compound of the temple but far out in the bad sections of town, why is it that although they do not heed the call at first, they ultimately come to do the great work of justice that defines what it means to be one of the people of God?

I wonder if it is something about how both groups have related to the law.

The chief priests, the scribes, the elites, live in a world in which they are granted the privilege of being pure, of being untouched and unsullied by the truths of the world that can seem so inconvenient to those who try to remain clean. They live in an isolated place where they have the freedom to talk about following the law.

But there's another group of people who has not been allowed to remain unsullied by life. They are a people who live at the margins and need to do what they need to do simply to survive.

If you ask me if tax collectors, prostitutes, you fill in the blank for whoever it is you feel is the most marginal, the dirtiest, the most impure person is by nature a bad person, an evil person, a messed-up person. I will say no. I think all of us are born good. Born with the image of God stamped on us as we are told in our ancient Creation stories.

And yet, it is through the ways in which our society, our traditions, our family dynamics work on us, that sometimes we find ourselves making choices that had we been allowed to live in an ivory tower of purity, we would have never made. Unfortunately, for some of us, these are not the truths that we are privileged to have. And I think this is a window into why it is that the tax collectors and the prostitutes ultimately are the ones who show up in the vineyard, show up to do the work of justice, because they know all about justice, but from the underside.

I was thinking about this passage, thinking about where in our lives we might have seen something similar. And the place I kept coming back to was the time, not too many years ago, when our black and our brown brothers and sisters started showing up to protests with signs that said, "Black Lives Matter". They are a people who in the history of this nation have known what it means to be disenfranchised, denied the vote, socioeconomically disadvantaged, incarcerated at far greater numbers than any other group in our nation. They are a people who are intimately connected with the workings of justice, the ways in which they may be fair and the ways in which they may not be fair.

And in response to the horrific systemic killing of black men across our nation, they raised the signs that said their lives mattered. They told truth. And what was the response? For some, it was acknowledgement. For some, it was support and encouragement. For others, it was almost a reactionary knee-jerk response that said, well, all lives matter.

Of course all lives matter. But this was a people who needed in that moment to remind the world that their lives mattered because it was obvious that to some people their lives did not matter. It was obvious to them, based on their interactions with the system of justice in our nation, that their lives did not matter in the same way that other lives mattered.

The voices from the marginalized told a truth, which was not being spoken from the ivory towers of our politics, of our schools, and our churches.

It took those who interacted with the criminal justice system, often in corrosive and heart-breaking ways, to raise their voices, to tell a truth, to show up in the fields and do the work of justice in a way that others were not doing. And thank God for that good work.

But the work of justice is not simply open to those who have experienced injustice. The work of justice is all of our work. We are all invited into the vineyard to make this world in the image that God would like for us.

So, the question becomes for those of us who may not have an experience of injustice, how is it that we enter into the vineyard?

We enter into it through compassion. When I use the word compassion, I don't mean a nice feeling, a fuzzy feeling, a warm feeling for your neighbor. Compassion in its root means to suffer with. To open yourself to the experience of another, of their suffering, and not to stand away from it, but to come into contact with it in solidarity with it.

Think of Jesus in his last days. He is the one who shows us the greatest form of compassion, the greatest form of suffering with. We talked just a couple weeks ago about whether or not Jesus had sinned. For many of us, perhaps for all of us, we believe that Jesus did not sin and was blameless. And yet, if that is true, Jesus chose to be arrested, falsely accused, tortured, and executed. The person who could so easily have exempted himself out of the injustice of his world, chose to enter into that injustice and to be marked and ultimately erased by it. The word we use for that movement into suffering is compassion.

That is what Christ is asking of us. To enter the field of justice, whether we are marked by that injustice or we are not marked by it, and to do the great work that we find there.

I'll just finish by referring to another statement that Jesus makes somewhere else. He says, it is harvest time. And there is so much work to do and yet the workers are few. Will we allow there to be few workers in the vineyards of justice? Or will we, in compassion and suffering with, enter into that good work and give voice and humanity not only to those we find there, but ultimately to ourselves.

Amen.