

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time: Tenant Farmers All!

The last three weeks our gospels have been about vineyards. Two weeks ago we had the Parable of the Laborers in the Marketplace. The Good Employer called people to work in his vineyard throughout the day. Last week we had the parable of the two sons who were called to work in their father's vineyard, one said, "No," but went. The other said, "Sure," but didn't go. This week we have another vineyard story, the story of the evil tenant farmers who tried to steal the vineyard from their Master, even putting his messengers to death and finally putting his son to death.

So why all these vineyards? The vineyard was a fixture in Jesus' time. Everybody drank wine. Wine can't be produced unless there are grapes. Therefore there were many vineyards in the ancient world that had to be worked. Actually, there are many wine producing areas of the modern world and therefore many vineyards throughout the world. You might be most familiar with the vineyards of California, the Napa Valley and Sonoma Valley, or maybe you are aware of the wonderful vineyards of Italy in Tuscany, Umbria and throughout Italy, or the vineyards of France in Bordeaux and Burgundy and all over France, or those throughout Spain and Germany and Greece. The production of wine is still a large enterprise throughout the world.

I want to tell you about a small vineyard where I grew up. That was my Grandpa's vineyard in Paterson, New Jersey. This wasn't a large grape farm like the ones I just mentioned, just a simple wood structure in his back yard. There were wooden slats along its sides and over the top. In the Spring the grape vines would wrap around the slats. By the summer clusters of grapes started appearing. The whole family, grandparents, children and grandchildren would help out harvesting the grapes. I remember the smell of those grapes. They say that your memory retains smells from the past. I think that is true. I can still smell those grapes. The aroma was amazing. My lungs filled up with their sweetness. After the grapes were harvested, Grandpa would use about half of them to make his own wine, Grandma and her daughters, my Mom for sure, would take the other half of the grapes and make grape jelly. You have not tasted grape jelly unless you have tasted homemade grape jelly. As we would say in the New York area, "Forgetaboutit." I remember coming home from school and smelling the grape juice being pressed out of the grapes, and then begging my Mom to let me have some of the jelly as soon as it was ready.

The vineyard was a treasure in my Grandpa's back yard. It was a treasure because it produced fruit for the whole family. It was not constructed for its looks. Nor was it constructed for the shade it would produce when the leaves came out, although I do remember having picnics under its shade. But that was not why my Grandpa constructed his vineyard. It was constructed to provide fruit for its owner.

The vineyard in today's Gospel was much, much larger than my Grandpa's, but its reason for existing was the same. It was constructed to produce fruit for its owner. Only, in today's Gospel, the laborers in this vineyard decide to steal the vineyard from the Master and keep the fruit for themselves.

Who are these wicked laborers? On one level they are the leaders of the Jewish people of Jesus' day. They were entrusted with the Vineyard of the Lord. They were called upon to provide fruit for the Lord. They were given the mission to nourish the people in the Word of God and prepare them for the Word Become Flesh. But they used the people for their own selfish gain. They would tax the people exorbitantly for their own financial support. The people were also their means of power before the Romans. They would use the sheer number of the people as a threat to the *Pax Romana*. They did not prepare the people for the Messiah. In fact, they didn't even want a Messiah. What if the Messiah would eliminate the need for the Temple? What would the Temple priests and Levites do? What if the Messiah were to tell the people that God was not looking for them to revolt against Rome, but was looking for them to build a spiritual kingdom? What would the Temple priests and Levites do? No, they didn't want a Messiah. He would disrupt their system of using God's people to enrich themselves.

"So," the Lord says, "the vineyard will be taken from those evil farmers and given to others who would nurture it and bear the fruit of the Kingdom."

That is one level of truth that this parable conveys. I suppose it has its merit in understanding salvation history. But does this parable really have a message for us who live 2,026 years after the birth of the Word Made Flesh?

It certainly does! We, the baptized, have been entrusted with the vineyard of the Lord. We are given the deep responsibility of providing fruit for our Master. We must produce fruit for Him, not for ourselves.

Sadly, I have seen people use the vineyard for themselves and not for God. The absolute worst example of this, the most horrific period of our modern Church's life, was the revelation that some priests were using their position in the Church to groom and attack children and teens. Thankfully, these priests have been removed from ministry and procedures were put into place to prevent further occurrences, but the thought that clergy would use their position to take advantage of minors still sickens all of us.

On a morally lesser scale, but still wrong, some people use their attendance in the Church for nothing other than what they can receive from the Church or from others. I have seen this. Perhaps you have too. I have seen people who come to Church to see and be seen, but who are not there to grow in their faith life or to bring their faith to others. I remember celebrating a Funeral Mass for a local government worker. A man who was Catholic but never attended Church and who had a very questionable moral life, came to the Mass and marched right up to the front of the Church. He then proceeded to make a great show of his supposed religion. By the way, he just happened to be running for office that year. I have seen, and perhaps you have seen, family members who come down to Florida to visit with Grandparents or great Grandparents and who come to Mass for the singular reason of being remembered in Grandma or Grandpa's will. Yes, there are many visitors who have

been away from the faith and who come with their Grandparents to bring them to Church and to take another look at the faith themselves. But these are not the ones of whom I am speaking. I am speaking about those who use the Church for their own selfish reasons. I have seen, and perhaps you have seen, young adults and high school people who come to Church for the sole reason of getting a girl or guy to go out with them and are completely closed to anything happening at Mass. I have seen high school people and young adults use their own attendance at Church as a motivation in their perverted minds to lead the serious Catholic they want to date to repay them for their attendance.

Using the Church for one's personal gain is not the reason why we come together to celebrate Mass. The Mass is the Sending Ceremony. The word *Mass* is derived from the last words of the Mass in Latin, "Ita Missa Est" "Go, you are sent." The Mass is the liturgy, the prayer of the people and priests united to Christ our Head. At the Mass we receive God's Grace in Word and Sacrament so we can bring the Lord's presence to the people of the world who long for God. The Mass is about being strengthened to produce fruit for the Lord.

We come to Mass and use the grace we receive here to lead our children, your classmates, your spouses, and yes even your parents to Jesus Christ. We do this, first of all, by growing closer and closer to the Lord so that our words and actions naturally reflect His Presence. We do this by standing up for all that is right and moral. We do this by being kind to others with the kindness of the One who was the kindest man to ever live. Think about how kind Jesus was, Think about the sick he cured, the dead he raised. Think about the woman brought to him and accused of adultery and think about little Zacchaeus, the short tax collector and robber of the people, who climbed up a tree to see Jesus and heard him call him down. Think about how Jesus said to those who were sinners, and says to us, "You are better than that. Now receive God's mercy and change your lives."

We have been entrusted with the vineyard of the Lord to produce fruit for our God. Grapes, sweet smelling grapes, bundles of grapes, bundles of love, must be nurtured by our kindness to be transformed by the Lord not just into wine, but into the very Blood of Christ. For we, the tenant farmers, have been entrusted to do no less than to fill the world with the Presence of Christ.

May we work hard to care for the Lord's vineyard.