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Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

On the wall of my office at home is a painting done by my mother of her picking cotton in a cotton field in Tennessee as a young woman. Because of my knowing her, and because of the way she used colors to depict the scene, it is easy for me to be drawn into the painting. And so when I view that painting for more than a few seconds, I can feel the hot sun, can smell many growing things, and I can get a sense of her toiling for most of the hours of the day in that field. I can feel the stiffness in my back as she bent over time and again to pick the cotton off one more plant.

The gospel for today could be that painting. We are drawn into it. It is a parable told by Jesus, set in a vineyard, where the owner of the vineyard is sending people to harvest the fruit of the vineyard, grapes. But the owner is having problems collecting the harvest of grapes from those who are renting the vineyard. The owner sends servants to collect the harvest. But they are either killed or abused. Finally, the owner sends his son. But he is also killed.

Jesus then asks the obvious question: “What will happen to those tenants?”

Those who were listening to Jesus tell the parable answered, “They will be killed, and the vineyard rented out to renters who are more productive and more responsible.”

It would be easy to see this parable as one of those “Get right with God” teachings. Be fruitful, be responsible, or suffer the consequences.

And a very cursory reading or hearing of this gospel parable could well leave one with that conclusion. So, is that what this is about, crime and punishment?

I have mentioned to some of you a story that appeared on the front page of the Des Moines Register some time ago.

The story recounts the supposedly daily routine of a woman walking her dog in Waterworks Park. As was her custom, as her dog provided her with dog feces, she would scoop it up, and place it into a container, thereby preserving the beauty of Waterworks Park for other passersby. The difference was, her container was a little classier than most. Not a plastic bag or sack. But something that resembled a small purse.

As the woman completed her walk with her dog, she put the purselike container on the back of the car, as she was putting her dog in the car. The paper says that some teenagers happened by, noticed the purselike object on the back of the car, and thinking that the bag contained cash or valuables, proceeded to take the bag off the back of the car. One of the teens, proud of the easy heist, turned to the woman as they left and said sarcastically, "Thank you." The woman said, "You're welcome."

After reading the story, I thought to myself, "If only life was that way, with the crime and the punishment all rolled up into one event. It would sure help with the overcrowding of prisons."

But the gospel today is not just about crime and punishment. It is about being fruitful and productive. That was, perhaps, a little more obvious in the agrarian, agricultural atmosphere of first century Palestine. But Iowa's claim on corn and soybeans means that we are not that far from being agrarian ourselves.

That means that it is easier for us to look past the icon of this parable into the meaning that resides beneath its appearance. It is like my mother's cotton field. If we look past the appearance of a vineyard, we can be in touch with the growth of plants. Roots straining, reaching into the soil for nutrients. Stems likewise straining upward, producing leaves, with the growing stems becoming vines. And finally there is the appearance of fruit, grapes. And the whole point of the growth of the plant can be seen in that edible fruit that is ready for harvest.

If we are able to capture that sense of dynamic growth, that sense of tremendous force straining out in all directions toward more growth, toward fruitfulness, then we may be able to grasp a sense of human growth and fruitfulness. And in essence, that really is how the metaphor of the vineyard is presented in today's gospel. The unfruitful vineyard is abolished, done away with. The hidden question is, what good is a grapevine that does not produce grapes? But even beneath that, we are in touch with the pervasive desire of God that as we live, we lead productive and fruitful lives. And so our growing and living and being fruitful is a dynamic drama of the incredible force of our lives in Christ, straining, growing toward fruitfulness, toward productivity. Now it is true that the vineyard, or life, changes with time. So the vineyard of life that we see in the first century is in contrast to our own lives.

Our own vineyard these days is in the midst of a Presidential election, in the midst of climate change with hurricanes and flooding, in the midst of war, in the midst of economic uncertainty and fear. But whatever life we live in, whatever the characteristics of that life, that vineyard, it is still the culture in which we live. And the call to bear fruit, to be productive is a call for all lives in all times.

The Apostle Paul calls the collective reality of all our lives growing in Christ a commonwealth. Jesus indicates in the gospel that fruit produced in a life goes with other fruit toward the creating and establishing of the Kingdom of God.

So, all the fruits in a productive life in Christ: the honesty, the kindness, the warmth and understanding, the patience, the perseverance all go toward the building up of the Kingdom of God. That means that when you refrain from doing what is inappropriate, insensitive, or unkind, the fruit of those good deeds is registered. When you try your best to be a good student, a good parent, a good son or daughter, a good wife or husband, a good friend, the fruit of those efforts is registered.

Since we as humans tend to look on the outside of things, as opposed to what is underneath, it probably is true that we underestimate the power of growing our lives in Christ. It probably is true that we underestimate the fruits that can be grown.

And we probably do not do a great job of weeding out what inhibits the growth of productive fruit. It may be that pessimism chokes off potential growth of important fruit.

When you work in a garden, it is important to know about the kind of soil that is needed for certain kinds of plants. And it is important to know about moisture and the rate of growth of the plant. But beyond all knowledge about the garden and about plants, it is important to just get in there and work with that soil and those plants. It is important to get your hands down in that dirt. In other words, you could know all there is to know about gardens and plants, but unless you are willing to work with your hands, the plant will not grow.

In a similar way, in the Christian life, in our life in the Church, we can have great knowledge about service, about stewardship, about evangelism, about working with youth or children, about music, about liturgy. But unless we are willing to get our hands dirty, service is not accomplished.

Dr. Robert Wuthenow, an Episcopal writer and scholar at Princeton University, says that in the 50's we lived in a world of what he calls a "dwelling spirituality." Answers were available and standardized for a lot of questions.

In the 90's and afterwards, he says we moved to more of a "Seeker Spirituality," where there are more and more unanswered questions.

He predicts that now we will move into a spirituality of practice.

If I heard Dr. Wuthenow correctly, he is saying that we will be getting our hands dirtier.

Christians in our day have been looking at the garden for a long time. We have been thinking about it for a long time. Perhaps now is the time when we get down and begin to work the soil.

If we do, I think that will make us more productive. I think we will produce more and better fruit. If we do, I think we will be contributing more to the Kingdom of God.

May God teach us about growth. May God teach us about fruit. And may God teach us about getting our hands dirty. Amen.