

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts, meet with your gracious approval, my strength, my rock, and our forever pursuer. Amen.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has been reworking God's vision of community - in the vineyards. Forming a new community that is rooted in the Kingdom of Heaven, rather than rooted after the oppressive kingdoms of this world. At this point in Matthew's Gospel Jesus has brought his teachings right into Jerusalem, right to the feet of those who claim to be caring for Israel and speaking for God, right to the Sanhedrin. These religious leaders of Israel have gone about reproducing the same kind of systems of authority, injustice and oppression modeled after the kingdoms of the world that the prophet Isaiah had criticized the leaders of Israel from all those years ago. Rather than being caretakers, stewards, made in God's image, they have chosen to be like gods.

And the characters in this text, the religious leaders know this parable is about them. Verse 45, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them." The Pharisees recognize that although Jesus is telling a story, they are the brunt and it's not funny. It's not a joke as Jesus tells them that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from them and given to people who can produce fruits. This isn't really about some imaginary wicked tenants. It's about them.

Jesus calls these religious leaders wicked tenants. They owned the land. Even though they did little of the work, they depended on the labor of the rest of the community. In turn, the rest of the community depended on the Sanhedrin's generosity to survive. They were given the vineyard and failed to produce and share, and share the fruits of the kingdom. Jesus is just naming the reality, the truth. Where the fruit is, there also is the kingdom. The words we heard from Isaiah this morning give the full effect of this parable: "The Lord looked for justice but found oppression; righteousness but only heard crying."

Our society hasn't changed much has it. For two thousand years, the church has largely failed to take seriously Jesus' accusation that the Sanhedrin are the wicked tenants is also an indictment against us all. This parable and the confrontation this parable provokes are like a mirror held before us so that we might see and recognize in our very own society what Jesus sees and recognizes.

We are guilty of claiming that God-given dominion justifies God-ordained domination. The systems we are apart of and flourish in carry guns, ensue beatings, imprisonments, relentless struggles for people of color, as one author put it, a system that carries swords that smells of ages of rotting flesh!

But this is not so much a parable of exclusion or condemnation as it is a parable of Jesus' unwillingness to give up. This is not to condemn us but to restore us, to call us back to life, and to lead us home. Jesus is unwilling to give up on you or me. He just keeps on coming. That is the good news.

And we trust that Jesus doesn't exclude us or anyone else from the kingdom of God. But, you know, he doesn't have to. We do it ourselves and we're pretty good at it. That's what the Pharisees have done. The Pharisees have not only excluded others they have excluded themselves.

All of us have stumbled over the stumbling stone – and I suspect we will all have times in the future when we stumble. But that stumbling does not need to lead us into a place of despair. In Richard Rohr's book *Falling Upward*, he writes: "Spiritually speaking, you will be, must be, led to the edge of your own private resources. At that point, you will stumble over a necessary stumbling stone, as Isaiah calls it; or to state it in our language here, you will and you must 'lose' at something." He says that this stumbling, this letting go and losing of something is the way God gets us "to change, let go of [our] egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further and larger journey."

In some strange way, God both provides us sanctuary and challenges our expectations for the world. The best news of all is that God is always like the landowner, sending the Son, pursuing us, reaching out for us, and loving us.

To know what the fruits of the kingdom look like we look at the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ. What do we see? Love, intimacy, mercy and forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, presence, wisdom, truth, healing, reconciliation, self-surrender, joy, thanksgiving, peace, obedience, humility.

Brandon and Faith Lee, started Bird and Branch Coffee. They had a dream to start a coffee shop that would serve as a place of refreshment and restoration. They wanted the planet, their employees, and all those who are a part of their supply chain, from producer to customer, to be better off because of their business. It now exists for the flourishing of all, as God intended.

They didn't hold the return on investment for their shareholders above the investment they were making in the laborers who harvest their beans, the baristas crafting each cup, or the planet's resources that make each drink and pastry possible. Brandon and Faith worked to ensure that those who lacked living wages and job training could have a shot at thriving in a society that says that they're unworthy because they once lived on the street, committed crimes, or were sexually exploited.

Brandon and Faith's parents did not come to America with the plan that their children would create jobs for the formerly homeless and incarcerated. That is not America's invitation and is certainly not the narrative for college-educated Chinese Americans living in New York City.

But that is just one of the possibilities when two people fall in love with Jesus and choose the vision of the kingdom of God over the one offered by America. Their faithfulness is a reflection of a higher allegiance and an alternate citizenship that trumps the one that dominant culture and their family's history touts as superior.

We've all been given vineyards. They are the people, relationships, circumstances and events of our lives that God has entrusted to our care. To reveal the presence and life of God in our lives is to produce the fruits of the kingdom. The vineyards, show us to be sharers in God's kingdom; or not. So, how's your garden growing? What do you see? What is your vision of the candidate you are voting for? Is there fruit? Is there life? Is there sharing in God's Kingdom for ALL? Is there life not just for you but for the neighbor?

May we find shelter in God as the one who gives us all we need and more, the one who plants and gives the growth. May we receive grace when we stumble, and may we be ever ready to receive the Son – the one who pursues us, never gives up on us, and loves us to the end.

The Prayer of Saint Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.