

Sermon: Tending to God's vineyard

October 4 is the day that the church remembers one of its great saints, St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis is remembered by most of us for his great love of all of God's creatures, and for creation itself.

He was also known for his great passion for the church and for the gospel, and for bringing the church back to its main purpose of proclaiming the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ to all of God's children. He was particularly passionate in bringing that love to those that the world often forgot.

But there is one other thing that St. Francis is known for, something that fueled his ministry and his passion for God and for all that God made, and that is his great zeal for prayer. He would spend hours in prayer before our Lord. And when he did, he would often pray a very simple prayer: "Who are you, God? And who am I?"

As I thought about those questions in light of today's gospel reading it seemed to me that today's parable – along with many of the parables told by Jesus throughout the gospels – serves to answer those questions. His parables were stories designed to teach us about God, and about ourselves.

In today's parable, we learn of a landowner who has planted a vineyard, leased it to tenants, and gone to another country. This landowner reminds us that God is the ultimate landowner, and we are merely his tenants. That's why we as Christians understand ourselves to be stewards of God's creation, rather than owners.

In Jesus' time, biblical scholars tell us that it would typically be five years before the landowner would expect to receive his first payment. So, I want you to imagine for a moment that you are one of those tenants. And that for the last five years you have worked hard in this vineyard, and it has produced much fruit. And now, after five years without a word from the landowner, there suddenly appear some servants of his to collect the landowner's produce. You might have begun to think and to hope that these servants would never appear. That the landowner forgot all about this vineyard. That you would get to keep it all for yourself. After all, it's been five years. But here these servants are, demanding his produce.

Now, I don't want to excuse the actions of those tenants. But I do want us to see that it's not so great a stretch to think that these tenants really began to believe that they owned the vineyard.

Isn't that always a danger for stewards when they haven't seen the owner in a long while? Isn't that a danger for ourselves? Well, you heard what happened next in the parable. The tenants of the vineyard killed the servants who came for the produce.

The landowner proves to be very forgiving, but very persistent. He sends more servants. The tenants treat them the same way. Then, the landowner sends his own son. The landowner is hoping that the tenants will finally get the point. That he hasn't forgotten about this vineyard. And the fruit is important enough to him that he's going to send his own son to collect it.

He doesn't send an army with the son, which perhaps would have been prudent. He sends his son with the hope that the tenants will respect him. Of course, it's not much a stretch to see that the son is really Jesus, sent by our heavenly Father to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom, and to call everyone to repentance. This parable teaches us who God is in part by teaching us who the Son of God is.

So, what happens when the son appears at the vineyard? They kill the landowner's son, so that they can inherit the vineyard for themselves. Now, don't you just wonder, what in the world were they thinking? Or, as Jesus puts it, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

Of course he's going to put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time. What else would he do?

Did they really think that by killing the landowner's son they would inherit the vineyard? Why would they possibly think that? And the only answer that I have been able to come up with, is that those first tenants must have been convinced that the owner of the vineyard would never come. Or perhaps even that he was dead. But either way, they must have been convinced that judgment day for them would never arrive.

That they could simply keep the fruits of the vineyard for themselves without fear of any consequences. What other reason can explain their actions? Convinced that the landowner would never return, they boldly killed his son.

A sad irony of this parable, by the way, is that it is told by Jesus just five days before he is killed. Clearly, this parable is teaching us about God as the landowner, and Jesus as his son. And clearly it is teaching us that the chief priests and the Pharisees are like the original tenants of the vineyard. It was pretty obvious.

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard this parable, they knew it was about them. How could they not? And yet, they still had Jesus put to death. What were they thinking? They must have gotten so used to being stewards of the vineyard that they forgot that they didn't own it. They must have been convinced that the true owner would never come to judge them.

But if this parable is about the chief priests and Pharisees, what does it teach us about ourselves? We can see what it teaches us about God. What about us? Well, Jesus seems to be teaching us that we are now the tenants, the stewards, of God's vineyard. We have been entrusted with this world, with all that we have, and are now called to care for it well, and to give our creator the fruits of our harvest.

And this parable is also warning us not to take any of this for granted. Our world, our life, our salvation – it is all grace, all a gift from God. We, too, can be tempted at times to think that we can keep the fruits of God's vineyard for ourselves. We work hard, making our living and providing for ourselves and our family, and it's easy to forget that everything that we have is not ours, but the Lord's.

The landowner of this vineyard still hasn't returned, 2,000 years later. Judgment day still hasn't arrived. And whether or not we share the fruits of our harvest with those in need, we will probably not be struck down by lightning. And whether or not we are nice to our neighbors this week, we will probably not receive a visit from the owner of the vineyard to receive the consequences. Whether or not we have lived selfishly this week, we probably won't notice any immediate consequences from our Heavenly Father.

But then again, none of us are guaranteed tomorrow. Today is all that we can be certain of. So why would we put off living faithfully as God's steward until tomorrow, if we can do it today? Why would we tempt God to take the Kingdom of God away from us, and give it to a people who will produce the fruits of the kingdom, as Jesus warns us in this gospel reading?

Why would we do that? There can really only be one reason – we would do this only if we believed that the landowner would never return. When it comes right down to it, this is a parable about faith, about the importance of believing that God is very real. This world is a vineyard that is not owned by us. We have a landowner who has entrusted us with it, and will one day hold us accountable to this trust.

Our God is very real, and sent to us God's only beloved son, Jesus, not just to check on the vineyard, but to die for us, and for the sins of all the world. And after he died on the cross, he was raised from the dead and sits at the right hand of the Father. And one day he will come again to judge the living and the dead. To check on his vineyard, to see what we have done with the place, and to receive the fruit of our labor.

Who is God? Who are we? These questions, asked by St. Francis, are answered in many and various ways throughout God's word. Today, we learn that God has given us a beautiful vineyard to care for, but it's not our vineyard. God asks us to care for this vineyard. To use what we have been given to bear fruit in our lives, not for ourselves, but for God.

The chief priests and the Pharisees refused. So God took the vineyard from them and gave it to us. But it can be taken from us, too. Will we be faithful? Will we bear fruit for God? These are questions that this parable compels us to ask. This parable teaches us that our God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. But God's patience can run out.

There will be a day when we will be judged. And the best way to prepare for that judgment is to expect the landowner to return soon. To be faithful tenants of the vineyard of our Lord. And then, to look forward to his promised return. Amen