

Psalm 118:10-24

Mark 12:1-12

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Dr. Ken Henry

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## Working in The Vineyard

Imagine a beautiful vineyard in early and late summer — Napa Valley, Paso Robles, Monterey, Santa Barbara, Sonoma County or somewhere outside of Charlottesville, VA — go, in your mind, to a vineyard. It's a vineyard where the vines receive careful attention, grapes are harvested at their peak, and bottles are bought and sold. There is even a tasting room on the property where Presbyterians sit down, drink wine, and let all their cares slip from their shoulders. The Prophet Isaiah once wrote:

*"Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard; for my beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill (5:1)."*

For those who first heard Jesus' parable, they would have immediately thought of Isaiah's love song for a vineyard — a working and beloved vineyard where the land is cultivated for the purpose of producing the fruit of the vine. The image of a vineyard represented what God had entrusted to the people: the bounty of creation, working together, sharing the harvest, and trusting the growing process and each other. (Trust was essential for a vineyard to function and thrive.)

Miraslav Volf, an author and theologian out Yale Divinity School, might describe this "vineyard," as the place where God's people flourish, the flourishing life: a place where life is well-lived, goes well, and feels good — a new heaven and new earth.

And yet, as Jesus' parable painfully illustrates, things can go wrong in the vineyard.

When the tenants feel they deserve more than others; when they begin to defend what they think is rightfully theirs and are not willing to share or live graciously; and, ultimately, when they choose to forget that everything they have is on loan from the Creator, they turn to violence in order to keep something that was never theirs.

Mahatma Ghandi once said: *"An eye for eye will leave the whole world blind."* That's the problem with the wicked tenants in this parable. They can only see what they might possess for themselves; they only see what's in it for them. They're blind. And so what was a beautiful vineyard to be shared and celebrated becomes a war zone.

On August 12, 2017, I watched a beautiful vineyard become a war zone. Standing on a street corner in Charlottesville, VA, across from the public library, and wearing a pastoral stole like this one, up the street, perhaps 40 yds away from me, I could see the center of a riot. It's what you all saw on tv — people beating on each other, throwing jars of urine at each other, and screaming at each other. Sharp shooters stood poised on rooftops staring down at the ensuing chaos while one woman handed out vegetables for peace, and I was grateful that Heather told me to leave my white robe in the car. There were other white robed figures in the crowd, and I didn't want anyone to assume I was with them. God's vineyard was in shambles.

A man ran by me, a sweatshirt wrapped around his head, blood pouring down his face. Across the street, a line of men and boys were dressed in kaki green. They wore protective gear. They seemed to be waiting for a signal.

And I still remember, looking at the 9-year-old boy, dressed in army green, wearing shin guards with a baseball bat in his hand. His eyes were cold. Hatred and violence was being passed down to the next generation, but can we be surprised?

That's what we do. We turn to violence. When we don't get what we want; when we believe we desire special treatment; when we think it's ours and ours alone; when someone gives us a gift, but we now decide it wasn't really a gift; we earned it. We put a fence around it! We dug a pit for the wine press! We even built a watchtower! How can that be a gift?

When we decide to revise and redact the story in favor of ourselves and start believing what matters most is what we get out of it, in all these things, we do violence to God, to others, and most of all, to ourselves.

By the way, many scholars speculate and conclude that the reason Jesus died on the cross was not because of anything the civil authorities or the Pharisees or Pontius Pilot did. Rather, Jesus' crucifixion and death was an act of mob violence; and that seems to be the case in so things that go wrong.

Do you see how Jesus' parables get preachers into trouble?

Do see how these stories haunt us with questions we would rather not face? I know. I know. We would rather go back to the beginning of this sermon; we would rather go back to Isaiah's beloved vineyard. We would rather talk about Isaiah's vision of that beautiful place where grapes grow, church people sip wine, and we kick up our feet for a while.

But these days, we cannot deny that there is something wrong in the vineyard — when people are dying in Ukraine, when bombs are going off and people are suffering; when violence finds its way onto the academy awards stage, when we find ourselves on the defensive, even plotting violence or revenge rather than opening our hearts and minds to the teachings of Jesus, there is definitely something wrong in God’s vineyard.

*“Have you not read this scripture?”* Jesus asks those who were listening to this parable. *“The stone that builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”*

Those who heard this quote from Psalm 118, would have recognized that Jesus had now moved on from the parable. And although the text reads “they realized he had told this parable against them,” there must have been some in the crowd who also realized Jesus was referring to himself and that he would soon become the stone that the builders rejected.

Yes. I came prepared. I have my white robe, I have my stole, I have my memories of this place of worship. What more do I need? I came prepared, but I also brought one more thing with me: this stone, a beautiful piece of Carmel stone which, people tell me, came from a quarry down near Monterey, CA. It’s the stone we see all around us this morning; this stone even encircles Jesus in stained glass as he prays in the garden, “Let this cup pass from me.” And yet, this was not one of stones selected for building Stone Church.

Indeed, years ago, I found a stone like this one in a pile of other stones that the stone masons and builders didn’t use. This stone was thrown away, discarded, deemed not fit for building. It’s hard to fathom how something so beautiful and worthy could be thrown away or discarded.

But what did you do with these stones?

Do you remember? What does God do with a pile of rejected stones? If you’ll recall, Jennifer Scott-Brand cut them up and, one Sunday, we set them on this communion table. Remember that Sunday? Just a pile of stones — a reminder that God takes what was rejected and builds a whole church. God takes a rejected stone and makes it the cornerstone.

Think about it.

The very thing we throw away or thought wasn’t worth our time becomes the very thing we are missing. And so as we come forward today to take communion, I invite

us to touch one of these stones, to say a prayer, and to recommit ourselves to working in the vineyard and sharing the harvest.

May God transform stones hatred into stones meant to build up The Body of Christ.  
Amen.