“When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit.”

Two weeks ago, you may remember, we were in the vineyard of Matthew 20 along with the master, the *oikodespotes*, whose mercy is so extravagant that it causes the workers to grumble. In last week’s Gospel reading from Matthew 21, we were again in the vineyard with the owner sending his two sons to work in the vineyard, one of whom said he would go but then did not, and one who initially said he would not and then did. For reasons we will leave unexplored, it will make some of you happy that we are, today, still in the vineyard.

Jesus follows the parable of the vineyard owner with two sons immediately with the one we heard this morning. In this parable, it is fruit-picking time, and the *oikodespostes*, the master, sends his servants to the ones in charge of the field to gather the fruit. These tenant farmers abused and killed those who were sent: a few at first, a great number next, and then the master’s son. We also had a vineyard in the OT reading from Isaiah 5, which, despite the careful planting and care, bore not good fruit but bad. To which the beloved owner responds by giving it over to the invading vegetation. The psalmist is living in light of this state of God’s people, who were a vine that he rescued, planted, and was flourishing but now were suffering from outside forces. To this, the psalmist cries out to God: “*Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; behold, and visit this vine” Restore us again, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be whole*.” (Psalm 80:14, 7)

Isaiah’s vineyard, David’s vineyard, and Matthew’s vineyard. Each one has a lesson in itself. Together, they draw our attention to God’s provision in flourishing, stewardship, and justice.

Provision for flourishing

That there are vineyards at all is a result of God’s provision. This is by design: “The Lord God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God caused every tree to grow that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life *was* also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:8–9, NASB). Food-bearing gardens and vineyards are, in fact, a dominant and frequent image to speak of God’s gracious provision of places of nourishment.

The opening words from Isaiah 5 from *The Message* are printed as the prefatory reading because they highlight this:

I’ll sing a ballad to the one I love,
  a love ballad about his vineyard:
The one I love had a vineyard,
  a fine, well-placed vineyard.
He hoed the soil and pulled the weeds,
  and planted the very best vines.
He built a lookout, built a winepress,
  a vineyard to be proud of.
He looked for a vintage yield of grapes,
Isaiah 5:1-2a, *The Message*

God is referred to here as the Beloved who clearly loves his vineyard, which he demonstrates in caring for it. And it is for one purpose: “He looked for a vintage yield of grapes.”

Remember that everything else in the vineyard and done to the vineyard is in service to the fruit. It is significant that Jesus’s parable happens at “fruit season.” Everything that happens is in service to fruit: the hoeing, the weeding, the pruning, the tending, the hedge-building, the feeding, the pest eradication.

The point of vineyards is fruit because, at the end of the day, it's about nourishment, about flourishing.

As the Psalmist says:

You have brought a vine out of Egypt;
you have cast out the nations and planted it.
You made room for it,
and when it had taken root it filled the land.
The hills were covered with the shadow of it, *
and the boughs thereof were like the mighty cedar trees.
It stretched out its branches to the sea *
and its boughs to the river.
Psalm 80:8–11

Just as Israel so also early Christians saw themselves as beneficiaries of God's provision so that they flourished. Furthermore, the early Christians understood that they because of God's very presence through his incarnate Son and by His Spirit, the Church was a place of nourishment and flourishing unlike any other congregation that had been or will be. It is God's very presence that makes the Church distinct from all other congregations. It is why the Church, through time, has spoken of the Church as the vineyard.

It has also been God's intention that his people would not only be the objects, the beneficiaries, of God's provision but that they would be the means of God's provision for others. As Irenaeus, the second-century bishop of Lyons, would say: "Flee to the Church, and be brought up in her bosom, and be nourished by the Lord's Scriptures The Church has been planted as Paradise in this world" (*Against Heresies* 5.20.2). This is the Church, both as gathered in a formal sense, and as we embody the Church in our homes and communities, become spaces for flourishing.

Provision of Stewardship

But while the people of God experience the provision of flourishing by his presence, he has empowered us with roles in carrying out that intent. This is a provision of stewardship. Remember, again, that this was the intent from the beginning: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 3:15).

The tasks of keeping a vineyard are many: the hoeing, the weeding, the pruning, the tending, the hedge-building, the feeding, the pest eradication. Some are given positions of responsibility, such as the managers in Matthew's vineyard. But there are others, such as those who are to gather the fruit. So also the tasks of the Church are many. Paul's letters demonstrate that everyone has a role to play. But while there are many tasks, two realities keep us from going astray:

The first reality is that we do not own the vineyard; we are stewards. The tenant-farmers managing the vineyards in Jesus's parable lost sight of this. As one contemporary confessional statement puts it: "God is the source of all blessings, temporal and spiritual; all that we have and are we owe to Him. Christians have a spiritual debtorship to the whole world, a holy trusteeship in the gospel, and a binding stewardship in their possessions" (*2000 Baptist Faith and Message* Article 13: Stewardship)

We rely upon God as the Vineyard Owner and Master for direction and resources. This is why we pray every week for bishops, priests, deacons, the congregation, and those in public service.

Second, the whole point is growth and flourishing. Everything that happens is in service to the fruit. The hoeing, the weeding, the pruning, the tending, the hedge-building, the feeding, the pest eradication. As a text circulating and used by early Christians, the *Odes of Solomon* (11.20) say:

> Behold, thy laborers are beautiful:
> they bring about good transformations
> from uselessness to goodness.
> The bitterness of the plants is changed in thy earth.

If we lose sight of these realities, then we are in danger of becoming a barren field or perhaps even worse, as Shakespeare so beautifully put it "An unweeded garden that grows to seed, Things rank and foul in nature possess it merely." (*Hamlet*, Act 1, scene 2). Tragically, as our

passages this morning show, this happens even to God's people. This leads to consider God's provision of justice.

Provision of Justice

What happens when the vineyard is not managed according to God's purposes and his righteous expectations? He mercifully steps in to bring it back to its purposes by holding those responsible accountable.

When those on the inside are not wise steward:

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice,
but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but behold, an outcry!
Isaiah 5:7, ESV

In Matthew's vineyard:

When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." (Matthew 20:40–41, ESV)

God holds accountable those who work against him and his purposes. Through discipline. Through judgment. We will confess this morning in just a few moments, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead."

The Gospel, though, is that the Almighty God who holds those who turn vineyards into wastelands accountable, is the same God, the same Master whose character is always to have mercy.

In crying out for God: the Psalmist says:

Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; *
behold, and visit this vine,
And the place of the vineyard that your right hand has planted, *
and the branch that you made so strong for yourself.
As for those who burn it with fire and cut it down, *
let them perish at the rebuke of your countenance.
Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand *
and upon the son of man, whom you made so strong for yourself.
Psalm 80:14–17

The Psalmist cries out for one who will deliver. Jesus's parable, in a way speaks to those who come on behalf of the Master, the servants, and then the Son of the Master himself. And while those hearing the parable are presented with a Master who loves his vineyard so much that he would even send his Son, we hear this knowing that, in fact, that "God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him. (John 3:16–17, NASB).

The Gospel this morning is that God has made provision in his Son for us to flourish in light of his mercy, his righteousness, his justice. God has made provision in Christ for us to be stewards of the vineyard where others can be nourished and flourish in light of that same mercy, righteousness, and justice. After all, "The season for fruit has drawn near, and he has sent his servants gather his fruit."