

Bounty to share (27A; Matthew 21:33-46)

Jesus knows exactly what he is doing.

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Nothing like a nice, relaxing passage from the Gospel of Matthew to set the table for World Communion Sunday. There aren't many places for the preacher to hide. There's even a watchtower to keep us from escaping.

The context is intense. Just the day before, Jesus turned over tables and got into it with the chief priests and scribes. Now he's right back in the temple in a very public way. We can assume his disciples are with him, along with would-be followers, curiosity seekers, paparazzi, and the same chief priests and elders who watched Jesus upset the apple cart the previous day.

As he tells this thinly veiled parable of a landowner who sends his own son, only for the tenants to kill him and throw him out of the vineyard, one can almost feel the anxiety of the moment. One can almost see the disciples' eyes opening wide and trying to get the attention of Jesus, just in case he doesn't realize the chief priests and elders can hear him.

He knows, of course. Jesus knows exactly what he is doing. He asks, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

And I want to know so badly—who is the "they" bold enough to answer, "He will put those wretches to death"? I imagine eyes all around Jesus are wide again. Do they not know the chief priests and elders can hear them?

I imagine when most of our congregation members hear this parable, they think of themselves sitting and listening in at the temple. Maybe they would not be the one who gave the answer, but they might be sitting right beside them. I know when I hear a parable, this is the role I tend to put myself in.

This parable takes place in a vineyard. The argument arises over what is to happen to the produce at harvest time. This landowner wants all of it—everything the land has given—and the tenants want to keep it all to themselves.

Busting through the very thin veil of this parable, I think it is fair to ask, What is *it*? What is the produce? What has the landowner provided that the tenants need to return but instead are trying to keep for themselves?

I wonder if for Matthew the answer can be found in chapter 25: food to eat, water to drink, welcome for the stranger, clothes for the naked, care for the sick, empathy for the imprisoned. When we hear these things, when we think about the need and disparities in the earthly kingdom, can we still envision ourselves sitting among those at Jesus' feet while he tells this story? Or do we suddenly see ourselves surrounded instead by a great bounty, trying to bargain with Jesus that all of it is rightfully ours?

The body of Christ, broken for us (and by us); the blood of Christ, shed for us (and by us). The bread and the cup—given to us not to hold onto for ourselves but to free us to share all the bounty of the harvest with others.