

Sunday, October 2, 2011
Lectionary 27
Proper 22
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 5:1–7
Psalm 80:7–15
Philippians 3:4b–14
Matthew 21:33–46
Year A

I.N.I.

God's a wannabee gardener.

There is that story of Eden, in chapter 2 of Genesis, a virtual paradise with fruit trees and flowing rivers, and the man and the woman, and creatures: pluming peacocks and chattering chimpanzees, skittering spiders, and aardvarks, dachshund dogs and calico cats. Well, paradise didn't last, sorry to say, what with distrust and boundary-breaking, so at the end of chapter three we have God the gardener-turned bouncer, closing the doors to Eden.

Then there is that ditty that Isaiah (or is it God?) sings in chapter 5, in our first reading, about love, love that God had for grapes in a space that was cleared of rocks, overseen by a watchtower, ready for fermentation by blasting more rocks for a wine vat, all for nought. What sprung up from the ground are wild, insipid grapes! So God says, to gardening, to lackadaisical Israel, "forget it! Let it be overgrown. Let it be neglected. You made your infertile bed of grapes, now lie in it!" Right?

Politicians sing their own songs about fiscal restraint, or job creation, or peace negotiations, or taxing the rich, or tapping oil in Canada. And if the people don't like what they hear, they say "forget it! Throw the bums out. Tell us how to get out of our indebtedness, while we can keep our lifestyle."

So we will get what's coming to us. If we isolate ourselves, we will be left alone. If we do nothing, the situation will get worse. If we do not work together, then we will be splintered into pieces.

God's a wannabee gardener, did I say that?

These past weeks and in the weeks to come, Gospel stories upon stories are being piled up on top of another, as Jesus ramps up the kingdom talk. The kingdom is about God's ways, God's righteousness, God's worldview, and it runs counter to common cultural expectations. Those whom one generation label sinner, less than worthy, not a person, will enter the kingdom ahead of the elite and successful. Those who take their faith for granted, who wear entitlement of ethnicity or the ways we've always done it, or who hide behind their piety, will be scolded and told to take a back seat to those who daily are reminded of their second-class status.

"The last shall be first, and the first shall be last."

So in case we haven't got it, Jesus tells another story. Are you ready for this? There was this wannabee gardener who really liked grapes, and created a potentially productive vineyard (didn't we hear this set-up in Isaiah?). Those that cared for the vineyard, the tenants, in exchange for a share of the produce, and some quality of life, were to prepare the good produce for the wannabee gardener. Such violence on the part of those tenants! "Slaves are coming, let's kill them so we can all the produce!" "More slaves are coming, okay, let's kill them, too."

What's the gardener going to do now? Twice he's been burned. Twice he has not gotten his produce. He has lost valuable slaves, and time.

Wouldn't you expect the gardener to say something like "forget about it. It's not worth it anymore. It's too much work. I'll start a new venture, maybe origami, or venture capital."

But no. This is a crazy, grape-obsessed gardener, who clearly loves the idea of a vineyard more than humanly possible, or conceivable, or realistic. What does he do next? He sends his son (what?!) alone (what?!), thinking that because he is the owner (what?!), the tenants will by extension respect his son (what?!).

Uh, no. Everything falls apart. No one gets what they think they will get. The landowner loses his son, and the tenants lose their claim.

God's a wannabee gardener. God takes enormous, crazy, love-driven actions to turn the world toward divine-oriented care, including especially in the planting and tilling of the earth's stewards, the beloved community, human creatures, self-centered, forgotten, or wandering.

Years ago, too many to count now that I am twenty-five years a pastor, there was an exercise tried out on groups I led retreats for. It gauged people's perception of the church. Sitting in a circle, I the leader passed out a paper cup, and asked people to hand it around, after spending time with the cup. As I handed out the cup, I asked the people to consider that that paper cup was the church, and they had the opportunity to express their connection, their impression, their relationship with the church without using words. Some would hug the cup. Some would begin tearing it to shreds. Still others would crumble it up into a ball. And some took a deep drink from it, as if it contained rich fruity fermented well-aged and nourishing wine.

A mentor and teacher of the church, the late Hans Boehringer, once gave a presentation demonstrating the glories of weekly eating bread and drinking wine. On wine, he said "it's alive! It's harvested from many grapes into one cup. And when you drink it, you are taking that fruity fermentation into your body."

Another mentor and teacher of the church, now at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Samuel Torvend speaks about the ways of a persistent God who wants nothing but unity from a fractious society when he writes:

The many, as it were, commune with the one Christ in the Holy Communion. But that one Christ calls a community, not a group of individuals, into existence through baptism and sustains that

one “body” with one bread and one cup. For the past fifty years, pastors, teachers, bishops, theologians, and biblical scholars have encouraged Christians to return, in a rather countercultural manner, to the use of one bread broken and give to the many: not because they are antiquarians or want to subvert the profits going to companies that peddle presliced bread, but because Christianity itself is a deeply communal and diversely messy reality, the corporate “body of Christ” enlivened by the Spirit. –Daily Bread, Holy Meal: Opening the Gifts of Holy Communion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, © 2004), p 60.

There is so much to do, to unravel the messes in the world and the problems of hostility toward one another, even [crumble cup] in the church (what?!) with its challenging buildings and declining membership.

What do you think God is going to do? Keep gardening, I think.

When we share Christ in the midst of those gathered in the vineyard today, when we are offered bread from a broken loaf and wine from someone’s grapes, perhaps we will we eat and drink it as if that broken and crushed meal will in truth serve to claim and reclaim the world for God’s good keeping.

Thank you God, for replanting the garden, and loving it. Amen

I.N.I.