

October 4, 2020

Lots of vineyards in our readings today...

From Isaiah we hear: “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry! The Lord of Hosts is looking for justice and righteousness...”

In the gospel reading, Jesus is still in conversation with the chief priests and elders.

And he tells them a parable about a landowner who builds a vineyard, leases it to some tenants. The landowner sends his slaves to collect his share, and they are killed. Probably referring to the prophets...

The landowner then sends his Son to collect his share and the tenants kill him as well. Probably meaning, Jesus himself... The parable is full of death.

This parable is a scathing commentary on the violence of the priests and elders, and they get it! They come to realize Jesus was talking about them...

Today I'd like to do a little reflecting about the kingdom of God as justice and righteousness, as Isaiah imagines.

Justice means right relationship. It's a mutual relationship where no one is taking advantage of another. Imagine a balancing scale, and it's even steven...

Unfortunately, sin is always tipping the scale in one direction or another.

Working for justice is about exposing sin and working toward reconciliation. It's fundamentally about forgiveness and it's nothing less than a transformation of the heart.

Quick story... My neighborhood in Austin was all about motorcycles. I had guys on both sides of me and across the street from me, and they all liked to ride. And of course, I'm a covetous person, and so, I not only started to want one, I got one!

My friend Ken, across the street, liked Harleys. His whole garage was a shrine to Harleys. One of the coolest man-caves you'll ever see. I liked going over there; Ken was a character. I loved his stories!

He was a great guy, but he sure didn't like my neighbor to the east. He had all kinds of bad things to say about him. He would make fun of his name; he would make fun of his motorcycle...

And it was mutual... Whenever they saw each other, they would scowl or make a rude gesture...

One day I asked Ken why he didn't like him... And of course, it all started years ago. They were once good friends, but Ken felt like he was being taken advantage of... There were a couple favors that were not acknowledged.

And of course, these things start out small and they build out of proportion. It was obvious he spent a lot of time disliking him. He seemed to be in some bondage to a grudge and he was consumed by it.

What would justice look like in this situation? What would a right relationship look like?

This is really hard stuff... Justice or right relationship is not some switch that you can just flick on or off... It's always a work in progress... As inequalities and hard feelings build so does the hard work of justice. And it's always a matter of the heart...

I had no illusions about ever changing Ken's opinion about the neighbor, but I knew I didn't have to participate in the animosity. So, whenever I talked with Ken, I made it a point to say something positive about the neighbor. I decided I could either pour a little gas on the fire, or I could pour a little water on the fire.

And slowly over time, Ken just didn't bad mouth my neighbor as much... At least not to me... Perhaps he just figured I wasn't sympathetic...

The thing about justice, is that we all participate in some way. Either we fan the flames, or we work for reconciliation.

Right relationship is a timely thing to talk about... We're not only in the midst of a pandemic, we're also in an election, I see relationships being strained all over the place. I know things are a little tense in my family...

It seems Democrats want to crucify Republicans, and of course vice versa... Like in the parable, human sin leads to violence...

So, what do we do about it? What does justice and righteousness look like in the midst of all this rancor? What are we called to do, as the Body of Christ?

In our parable, Jesus asks the chief priests and elders what the Landowner should do to the murderous tenants when He returns. They reply that he should put “those wretches to a miserable death.” They’re talking about what should be done to them! Nothing could be more ironic!

Well, now here’s the rest of the story. We come to understand that God is the Landowner, and the tenants are the chief priests and elders. Who did in fact orchestrate the killing of the Son of the Landowner...

And on the third day, that very Son was raised from the dead, and he did not put those wretches to a miserable death, instead, he announced, peace be with you. The Son brings forgiveness! Even to those who would have him killed!

Forgiveness is the new way forward. Grace is God’s way of balancing the scales, of healing injustice. In these days of difficult discussions and decisions, let’s keep our eye’s on Jesus, let’s be loving, kind and gracious, more than ever...

Because God forgives us, we forgive each other... “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” It’s our prayer and our way of life.

We’re not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but we keep working at it! Now more than ever, let’s give each other a lot of space, a lot of grace and forgiveness. When the world out there wants to crucify each other, let’s be witnesses to justice and righteousness.

Amen...