

THE FRUIT AND THE VINE

Texts on Sunday, October 5, 2008

Isaiah 5: 1-8; Matthew 21: 33-46

When Jesus started to tell his parable—*There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it*—the listeners cannot have missed his reference. They knew the scriptures, they knew the scroll of Isaiah, they knew the song that begins, *My beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill; he dug it and cleared it of stones . . .* And they knew the burden of Isaiah's ancient word, a judgment on Jerusalem for their worship empty of moral consequence, for their "land filled with treasures"—but treachery for the least; for their land with "no end to their chariots"—but empty of charity. You heard the curse: "Woe unto them who join house to house, and lay field to field, till there be no place to be placed in the midst of the land!" Sounds like a mortgage foreclosure crisis to me.

When Jesus told his parable in Jerusalem, they got it that he spoke now from the long darkened stage of Israel's great prophets, saying some soon doom was sure to come to a people bent on injustice. Remember: by the time Matthew got around to writing this gospel, doom had surely come: in the year 70 A.D., Rome's legions burned Jerusalem and broke its temple to the ground and scattered its people to the winds. Now, Matthew wrote his stories for a church mostly of Jews, that is, to people long experienced with scriptures that claim that God uses political and economic ruin to punish his people for their insincere worship and money madness. Don't you think Matthew's church must have felt they were singing God's own anthem by claiming that Jerusalem's tumbled towers and temple fulfilled Jesus prophecy, that "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom"?

Were they right? Throughout history, most Christians have assumed that they themselves are the people to whom the kingdom of God was given after it was taken away from the Jews—as if the kingdom were a gated community with a door and a guard and keys and we got the lease and the keys and so that's where we live. Tragedy stalks this thought, and Jesus weeps.

If you would take up the cross as Jesus bids you do, there is only one way to interpret these oracles of doom on the people of Judah. It is this. The warning of woe-to-come cannot be laid in a museum of religious history; it must come alive. It cannot be laid on Jews or Judaism or Jerusalem, but on the main religion of the land; on whoever holds power and privilege and prays to God and ignores the poor, so that instead of justice there is torture, instead of righteousness, a cry. Wherever the Bible reports a prophecy of doom on Jews, the right translation for us is "Christians." Why is that? Because there was and is no error in the religion of the Jews. Jesus never claimed that his religion was false in any respect; ought we not listen to him on that subject? The error he spoke of was in their hearts. That error of heartlessness spreads like a mudslide in every people who are rich and who have the right religion, but whose comforts are constructed of suffering borne by wretched souls they never see.

For how many years—decades!—has our own land been infected with the confident shouts of victory and wealth from leaders whose religion and politics are welded into one. Can you feel how false to the divine thundering Spirit in the scriptures is any interpretation thereof that puts us and our religion and our wealthy ways safe behind kingdom walls while turning its ear from the cries of injustice that rise across the globe? The men tortured in secret by our men; the habeas corpus denied; the tens upon tens of thousands of foreigners' lives made forfeit by our wars, winning what?—the ruins of our ghettos while new moon-walks are planned . . . And what did God's church say to power and to oil as our money-mad machine rolled on? Silence, pretty much. Some soon doom is sure to come to a people bent on injustice, said the prophets. "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom," says Jesus.

Now, the people never want to hear the prophets. They are always hated in their day—Martin Luther King was hated by most Americans while he lived. But still, the people keep the words of the prophets in their holiest books. They could throw them away, or just not read them. But for something deep in our conscience, for some knowledge how far we have driven our chariots from God's way, for some wisdom we have of how helpless we are to turn the wheel toward justice, we guard these words of the prophets. May we let the Spirit bring them alive at the right time.

This is the right time. Don't you feel it? Last Monday, Main Street called Congress to shout, *Don't bail out Wall Street!* So they didn't, and a trillion dollars of treasure evaporated the next day. The sad thing is that Main Street doesn't yet see that the present crisis is not an us-and-them thing—us innocents abused by them greedy. No. This whole system is *our* system. We are all in it, we have all benefitted by its efficiency and its greed, and we are about to discover that we are one. Maybe, if the world is fortunate, we will even come to see that we are one with the people of every land, even those who terrify us, for the whole house is shaking—the world house, as King called it. The time for truth-telling is at hand.

Is this the Lord's doing? The ancients would say so, but then they said that about every sort of historical calamity, that it was planned either to prosper or to punish people. Most of us don't think like that anymore, and I don't recommend the effort to turn our thinking backward, to try to make out the will of God from the winds of wars and hurricanes. But consider this. What if what they called God's wrath against a rich and self-righteous people is not a plan to punish but a law, a spiritual law, like the law of gravity? America agonized through two great internal calamities, the Civil War and the Great Depression, separated by about seventy years. Each was brought on by crushing greed, the first being the lust for slave labor, the second being a land speculation bubble turned into a credit crisis. Seventy years have passed again. What if "God's law" is that self-interest must ultimately run into a wall? That after a few generations, the pains which wealth and complacency continually inflict upon the unseen poor finally break the joists of the whole house? What if that's God's law—that empires rise and fall on the madness of men for money, but the cry of the poor will be heard and a leveling will come for righteousness' sake and the kingdom of God be given to a people that produces fruits fit for their king?

What if you saw it that way, all of you, the whole church at Silver Creek—what would you do? There would be a run on sack cloth and ashes at the True Value, but after that, what? When people see something together, after denial, shame, and fear have run their course, a spiritual power comes to dwell with them. It is not like anything they have known. First, a shared way of seeing is a gift of grace, not just the result of study. But whether we together look on the grievousness of our shared crimes against the poor and the weak; or whether it is on our shared fate with all God's creatures, including the ordeals our own families and friends face, for all of us go down to the dust; or whether it is on a new world we cast our eye, a hope forming in our breast for righteousness to burst forth incarnate on the earth through Christ in us, the power and the gift in the seeing is this: We become the fruit of the vine, one true church, when we abide in him, and he in us; when, in what we have done to the least, we see what we have done to him crucified, and become convicted, as we have not been before, that this table is set for all God's creatures. In such a vision, we die to our old selves, that we may rise and eat the bread of righteousness with all.

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