

Proper 22A, Matthew 21.33-46
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 8, 2023
The Rev. Scott Walters

My Uncle John would have been 94 in a few weeks if he'd come out from under the anesthesia at Swedish Hospital in Seattle last Sunday. But he didn't. Aunt Lanita said this was for the best. A mercy even.

John worked as a physician at Swedish for 30 years. In 1988, he was a year older than I am now when he took a writing course at the University in Washington and wrote his first poem. He kept writing poems for the rest of his long life, but I think this first one was one of his best.

Among Delicious and McIntosh
Six Granny Smiths

Purchased by one who knows
A homing son's hunger

Durable fruit passing
Through an old wooden bowl.

It's a love poem. But it's not about the love of apples. Not primarily, at least. And they take their apples pretty seriously out in Washington State. The poem is about a mother's love for a son. And a husband's love for his wife's love for their son. No one in their household, you see, liked green apples except my cousin Matt. So when Matt came home from college, Lanita never failed to have a few Granny Smiths waiting for him in the old wooden bowl on the counter. Durable love passing through a moment as something we can see and touch and taste.

Well, I wanted to say something about my Uncle John, because he was an important person in my life. But I also just wanted to begin with something sweet and lovely before we delve into that terrible and terrifying parable Jesus told over in Matthew 21. I will put a pin in the idea, though, that love always involves an attention to the hungers and loves of someone else. If I stay trapped only in what I find to be good, a green apple will never show up in my fruit bowl, will it?

So. The parable. It's a familiar one, but it's not a story many preachers would choose to preach on if they got to choose. I only chose it because I thought you might not want to hear a ten point sermon on the ten commandments. Let's take a look at it.

By the twenty-first chapter of Matthew, things are getting intense. Jesus has just entered Jerusalem, triumphant on a donkey and a colt, as the crowd spread their cloaks and palm branches on the road. We're entering Holy Week, in other words.

When he gets into Jerusalem, he immediately goes to the temple and turn over the money changers' tables, saying God's house of prayer had been made into a den of robbers. By any objective standard, it makes great sense, then, that the chief priests and elders ask, "By what authority are you doing these things?" After essentially saying, "I'm not going to tell you," Jesus tells two parables. The first was last week's gospel about one son who says he will go do the work he's been asked to do in the vineyard but doesn't. And another son who says he won't do the work, but does. Then he tells the story we just heard.

It seems that there's a whole lot of disruption of authority going on in this chapter. I should remind us that, when we read that Jesus is challenging chief priests and elders, it's not Christians verses Jews. Everyone in the story is a Jew. When we read the story in a Christian context, the image you should insert for the priests and rabbis is whoever wields some kind of official religious authority in your world. In other words, you should probably be thinking of someone like me, not my friend Micah Greenstein. Keep this in mind when we say that authority was being disrupted by Jesus as he raises the question of what faithful leadership looks like.

In today's parable, there's another vineyard, but this one is leased out to tenants. When the owner sends slaves to collect the produce, the tenants kill them so they can keep the profits for themselves. After losing three slaves, the owner says, "Surely they'll respect my son." But the tenants are such thoroughly bad eggs, they think if they knock off the son they'll get not just the profits of one harvest, but the whole inheritance. It ends with the wretched tenants being put to a miserable death, and the vineyard being leased out to someone else. Someone else will get to be in charge.

Now, remember that we're moving into Holy Week. That being the case, the story seems a little on the nose, wouldn't you say? Jesus, who some call the Son of God, is about to be handed over to be killed by the Romans, even though more and more people thought he was sent by God to do the redeeming work among the people of Israel that the prophets who came before him tried to do. He's going to be the son who ends up getting killed, isn't he? And then, let's see ... and then God the father/vineyard owner is going to come swooping in to set things straight and will put those miserable Roman wretches to a miserable death after the son gets hung up on a cross, right?

But wait. That's not what happens. That's not what happens at all, is it? The son gets killed, but from the cross he doesn't say, "Dad is really gonna let you all have it when he gets wind of this." Heavenly armies do not descend and wreak violent havoc on the empire so that the good people in the story get to live happily ever after.

What happens is that the son, from the cross, looks out at the ones who are crucifying him and says, "Forgive them, Father. They don't know what they're doing." Apparently, even in the most extreme and awful situation imaginable, there is a Love that can, even then, look up from its own hurts and needs, and wonder what the real story might be about its persecutors. It wonders what they might really need or desire deeper down in the broken lives that have led even to this. Incarnate Love suggests to God that they might need forgiveness.

That's how Holy Week plays out. Why did the parable end like it did? Well, in my little synopsis, I left out something that's easily overlooked. Did you notice? Jesus didn't actually say that the landowner would put the wretches who killed his son to a wretched death. He just asked the people listening to the parable what would happen. The religious leaders say that the vineyard owner is going to come set things violently straight. And Jesus doesn't say, "Yep. That's what's going to happen this Sunday when I'm resurrected." What I think he says is, "Well, if that's how you finish the story, then you can't be in charge. Your authority will be taken away, because violent forms of justice are not what the fruits of God's kingdom look like."

At the forum this morning, Ardelle and I talked a bit about our recent pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. For those who don't know, El Camino de Santiago means the Way of St. James. This trip was to raise money for an organization Ardelle started called The Partner's Path that offers connection and soul care for spouses of Episcopal clergy. We'd walked the last 70 miles or so of the French route across the north of Spain twice, once with a group from Calvary four years ago. This time we took a different route, starting at the border of Portugal, as a second Calvary group did in 2019, meeting our group in Santiago that year.

On the Portuguese route, the town we reached on the fifth day of our walk is Padrón, the namesake of the wonderful green peppers we'd been eating at most of our dinners along the way. The people of Padrón will tell you that their town is just as worthy a goal for a pilgrimage as Santiago. For it was in Padrón that St. James is believed to have first preached the gospel in Spain. You can climb up the hill and see the pile of boulders on which he stood when he did.

In the Church of St. James, down on the River Sar, the altar is built on top of the stone to which James is said to have tied his boat and come ashore. The ancient stone is actually visible beneath the altar in a kind of little alcove. Like many of the churches in Spain, the nave is surrounded by smaller altars, one with souls depicted in the fires of purgatory, another atop a glass casket with the statue of a corpse within it. Strange sights for a Protestant boy like me.

But the strangest of all was a statue at the back of the church where Saint James himself was depicted atop a white horse with a sword in his hand. Beneath the horse's hooves were invading Moors that Jesus's disciple was in the act of slaying. Not all the camino's legends are so innocent, you see. For it's said that 800 years after James's martyrdom in Jerusalem, he appeared in the sky on a horse during an invasion from the south. The legend says he killed 60,000 Moors on a single afternoon, turning James the Apostle into James the Moorslayer.

And there it is again, isn't it? We lost sight of the way of Love and finished Jesus's story with "We will put those wretches to a miserable death!" Once again, it seems Jesus might shake his head and say to us, "Well then, you cannot be in charge. Not in my kingdom in which love and forgiveness extends even to enemies."

Of course, it's tempting for me to look down on the people of Padrón smugly and self-righteously. We have no such statues in our church at Calvary. We don't go in for that creepy saint-worshiping stuff either. What's the matter with these people? Which actually is the question Love would ask, if the question is genuine, not rhetorical. What is the matter? is a worthy question, if we ask it as we'd ask it of someone we love. What is the matter, friend? What's going on within your heart or your history that brought you here?

The truth is I know next to nothing about the lives of the people growing their peppers along the banks of the River Sar. Don't get me wrong. The statue needs to go as does the legend. But the question Jesus keeps pressing upon me and upon all of us is What does it look like for us, here and now, to set aside our confident, violent visions of what we think would set things straight, and ask what love requires? Ask perhaps what these strangers to us might actually need in their lives to make them a little more whole.

You could even say that the work Jesus calls us to is to stop filling up the old wooden bowl on the counter of my life with only what I need and only what I love, and to learn the needs and loves and stories of the people I'm called by this Jesus to love. Even my enemies, he says. Especially my enemies, his story says so clearly. How, I think he still asks, will you learn to set aside your self long enough to see what six green apples might feed the body and delight the soul of someone else?