

THE DELUGE OF GRACE

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 4, 2020

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?'" (Matthew 21:42)

Last Friday afternoon I needed to get away from my screen so I decided to take the bags of rotting compost in our kitchen to the bins at the Green Market in Union Square. I would stretch my legs and save the planet at the same time. On the way I noted a better than average assembly of street preachers hoping to be heard. A woman with a handheld bullhorn was singing what I recognized to be a song from the 1970s charismatic renewal movement. She would frequently stop singing to announce that Jesus was coming back soon. I made the mistake of meeting eyes with her, so I had to quicken my pace. At other times I've had to sidestep Mormons, Muslims, and Buddhist monks trying to flag me down. It's always an adventure getting past the Hare Krishna community, especially when they seem to be working in tandem with the Buddhist monks. They are difficult to dodge. But dodge them I do, all of them, always.

After dropping off the compost and turning toward home I noticed a new street preacher of sorts with an urgent message to proclaim. The preacher is actually not a person, but the enormous electronic billboard on the building known as One Union Square South. The billboard has been there for many years, flashing numbers that people thought might reflect the rising national debt or perhaps the number of losses the New York Mets will compile in the coming decade. It was neither of these. It was simply a clever way of counting the date and time. But now it is something different. Now the display has been turned into what is called a Climate Clock. When I passed by on Friday I took a photo and the digits read: 7 090 16:09:01. What the numbers meant in that moment was that we had 7 years, 90 days, 16 hours, 9 minutes, and 1 second until we reach the tipping point of global warming. If we don't drastically reduce the amount of carbon we pour into the atmosphere by then, the ill-effects on the ecosystem of planet Earth will be irreversible. Earth has a deadline. If the woman with the bullhorn is right and Jesus is coming soon, the question is: what will he find when he arrives? Perhaps this one is a message not to dodge.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew we've heard what is no one's favorite parable – the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. On first hearing it is a violent story of greed and death. An absentee landlord decides that the time has come to collect his share of the produce from the tenants who are leasing and working his vineyard. The tenants apparently fear that the landlord is going to take too much – or perhaps all of it – so they do more than dodge the messengers. They beat, murder, and stone them. Finally, the landlord sends his son to the vineyard, thinking that the tenants will now understand that he really means business. But no, with a mindboggling display of faulty logic the tenants figure that by murdering the son they will inherit the vineyard. Of course, it doesn't work, and the original hearers of Jesus' parable conclude that now the landlord will "put those wretches to a miserable death." No more time for them. They have exhausted their stay in the vineyard. So there you have the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. It is the obnoxious street preacher of Jesus' parables – one that we might prefer to dodge altogether.

Lately, however, I am coming to understand the strange parable in a new way. In fact, it is not so much as story of gloom and doom as it is of God's grace. From beginning to end the

parable sings of God's goodness and love, made known to us in the creation. Consider the landowner who chooses to pour his own time and resources into a plot of earth. It would be a process of five years between breaking ground and the first harvest, so patience and hard work would be essential. He cultivates the land and plants the grapevines. He builds a hedge fence around the field to protect it from wild animals and thieves. He constructs a lookout tower for added oversight, and digs a winepress in the midst of it. In the days of Jesus, wine was symbolic of life, and joy, and blessing. The landowner wants to share the life of creative joy and blessing with others, so he leases out the vineyard to tenants. He gives them every material thing they need to succeed.

Jesus' original audience would have known instantly that mention of a vineyard was code for something else. It was code for Israel – God's chosen people and the land God gave them to occupy. "He's talking about us," they rightly concluded. Likewise today, it's not a stretch to enlarge the parable to include not only the church, but the earth and all of its inhabitants. He's talking about us. Through the grace of creation, God has blessed us with every material thing we need to flourish. William Temple was a brilliant Archbishop of Canterbury during the years of World War Two. He wrote that "Christianity is the most avowedly materialistic of all the great religions." In other words, we understand that God chooses to express the Spirit through the material order: bricks and mortar, bread and wine, flesh and blood. In fact, we have no access whatsoever to the spiritual realm unless it comes to us through the stuff of the earth. If you don't believe me, try expressing your love for someone without in any way using your body. It can't be done. But through matter, with our bodies, the possibilities are endless. Thus the created order – including land, fences, winepresses, and grapes – these are the landowner's, or God's expressions of love. As we sing in the great hymn, St. Patrick's Breastplate: *the glorious sun's life giving ray ... the stable earth ... the deep salt sea* – these all bear the strong Name of the Trinity. They are the Lord's doing, and amazing to our eyes. It is amazing that God invites us to share in the joy of existence that is to be found in this vineyard.

Some would stop me right there and say that I am looking at a bloody parable and a fallen world through rose-colored glasses. How can I talk about the goodness of creation when the coronavirus stalks the earth, when racism infects our hearts, when millions go hungry, and too few people seem to care? Jesus was not naïve. In fact, when he first told the parable he had another depressing vineyard story in mind: the prophecy of Isaiah (5:1-7) that we heard as our Old Testament reading this morning. Isaiah spoke of another landowner who did everything right. What could possibly go wrong? Well, everything went wrong. The landowner expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry. The landowner expected choice grapes to produce fine wine. Instead, the vines yielded bitter grapes that were good for nothing. So what did the landowner do? He said, "Time's up. I've been patient, but it's time to dismantle this vineyard and devote my time and resources to someplace else."

Where else? Where else for us when the time runs out and we have exhausted our stay in the vineyard? Well, perhaps Venus. Did you read in the news last month that scientists have detected what they think could be evidence of life on the hellishly hot second planet from the sun? What they've discovered is the presence of phosphine gas mingling in the clouds of sulfuric acid high in the Venusian atmosphere. Apparently, the most plausible explanation for phosphine is some form of microbial life dwelling in the temperate sweet zone between the deep freeze of outer space, and the 900-degree temperature on the surface. Suppose that these microbes in the mist were sentient beings. They would breathe their air and declare, "I love the smell of sulfuric acid in the morning. What a wonder the creation is, perfectly balanced for our existence, made in the image of God as we are. This is the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." If indeed such creatures were to exist we could join them in their praise but not in their vineyard. Their wine would kill us! We will need far more than seven years to find another habitable planet, so in the

meantime, this fragile earth, our island home is all that we have. Will we be good stewards or wicked tenants?

According to the parable, God holds out hope. God has faith in humankind that we will be good stewards. In fact, God has more hope in humanity than humanity has in itself. Despite all the setbacks and disappointments and disasters – those of our own making and those not our fault – the deluge of God’s grace continues. Indeed, I take the single point of the parable to be the unstoppable deluge of grace. God has never been an absentee landlord. Even in the parable the implication is that the landowner was only gone for the length of a single growing season. What is more, God has always sent messengers – Moses with the Law, and the prophets preaching justice and righteousness. Why? Because God cares about day-to-day life in the vineyard. God cares about your life and mine, and yearns for us to walk in his way. Prophets typically don’t have an easy go of it. We dodge them as we do street preachers in Union Square. Admittedly, not all of them speak for God. In fact, most probably don’t. But every so often a voice in the wilderness cries out with the accent of heaven, and you know that the Lord has spoken.

Above all, God’s confidence in humankind is such that finally he came to be one of us. In the parable we wonder: why would the landowner send his son to the tenants after they had beaten and killed the previous messengers? The only answer can be an extraordinary love for the tenants and a daring trust that they will eventually come to their senses and do the right thing. Is it a misplaced trust? No, it isn’t. The verdict is in, and God has redeemed humanity. In Jesus, God has demonstrated that he will keep coming back to us no matter how many times we reject the overture of divine love. *“Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?’”* As for now, we have time – time to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, time to live by the power of his Spirit, time to grow into the full stature of Christ, and even reach for the high expectations that God has for us. Such a life is what St. Paul was writing about in today’s reading from Philippians (3:4-14). Above all he wanted *to know Christ and the power of his resurrection*. He wrote: *Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. And there is a strange clock ticking away up at Union Square. Parables, like street preachers, are funny things. They are what you make of them. I think of the man who had a dream that he was being chased by a lion. When he could dodge the beast no longer and the lion finally had him trapped, the man screamed in fright, “Are you going to kill me?” The lion completely broke character and replied, “I don’t know. You tell me. It’s *your* dream.”

So it is with the rather ferocious parable we’ve heard today. You can take it as a commentary on the folly of human nature, and a threat that we, the wicked tenants, are about to lose it all. Or you can take it as an appeal of divine love. God has an unstoppable love for humanity, and his grace is a deluge. God has confidence that we will amend our lives and be good stewards. God wants us to know Christ and understand ourselves to be partners with the landowner, who comes that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

Like a mighty lion, Jesus pins us to the ground and says, “Listen to another parable.” Make of it what you will. It’s now your parable.