

Still Tending: Hope at the Table

Isaiah 5:1-7 | Psalm 80:7-15 | Philippians 3:4b-14 | Matthew 21:33-46

Let's be honest about something. When Jesus starts telling a story about a vineyard and some tenants who go bad, we all do the same thing. We scan the room for someone else to be the tenants.

It's an old habit. Look at how Isaiah handles it. He shows up like a street singer at a wedding: "Let me sing for my beloved a love song about his vineyard." And the crowd leans in. A man plants a vineyard on a fertile hill. He digs it. He clears out the stones. He plants the choicest vines. He builds a watchtower and carves out a winepress. Everything you do for something you love. Then he waits for grapes, and gets wild ones. Sour. Useless.

And then the song turns, and the singer asks a question: "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done?" We tend to hear that as a threat. I want us to hear it as heartbreak. That's the sound of someone who gave everything, standing in the rows, trying to work out where it went wrong. Isaiah says God looked for justice, mishpat, (**meesh-PAHT**) and found bloodshed, mispach (**mees-PAHKH**). God looked for righteousness, tzedakah (**tzeh-dah-KAH**), and heard a cry, tze'akah (**tzeh-ah-KAH**). Those words sound almost the same. What God hoped for and what God heard are one syllable apart, and a world apart.

Now Jesus tells his version, and he changes one thing. In Isaiah, the problem is the vines. In Matthew, the problem is the tenants. And notice who's listening: the chief priests and the elders. Serious, committed, religious people. This is not a story about somebody else's religion. It's an insiders' story. It's ours.

Because here's what the tenants do. They were handed a vineyard they didn't build, and somewhere along the way they started saying "mine." So when the owner sends servants to ask for fruit, the servants look like a threat. And when the son shows up, they say, "Let's take the inheritance."

Now, we don't kill prophets in this room. But we know something about "mine," don't we? We live in a culture that taught us to build our own lives, to think for ourselves, to own our convictions. And a lot of us did exactly that. We questioned what we were handed. We took our faith apart, on our own, and put it back together in a way we can stand behind. That is holy work. God does not want a borrowed faith. But there's a shadow side. When "my journey" quietly turns into "my property," anyone who comes asking for fruit starts to look like an interruption. The neighbor in need. The tired friend. The claim a community makes on our time. Even the God who asks anything of us at all.

Paul knows this territory. In Philippians 3 he lays out his résumé. Circumcised on the eighth day. Tribe of Benjamin. Hebrew of Hebrews. A Pharisee. So zealous he persecuted the Christian church. Blameless under the law. If anybody has reason for confidence in his own credentials, Paul says, I have more. And then he says: whatever gains I had, I now count as loss. He isn't saying his tradition was garbage. He's saying it was never where his worth lived.

So let's ask ourselves a practical question. What's on our résumé? Degrees, sure. But also the hard questions we've earned. The faith we rebuilt from the ground up. Even the humility we've practiced. It is possible to turn our deconstruction into a credential, to say "I've done the work" in a tone that sounds a lot like "I'm not a tenant. I'm the owner."

But I want to say something carefully, because some of us aren't here out of pride. Some of us are here out of exhaustion. We heard the word fruit, and what we heard was demand. We've given ourselves to jobs, to

families, to congregations, to causes, and some of it came up sour. Some of what we planted never grew, and we've spent a long time asking what we did wrong. If that's where you are this morning, hear this: God's question in Isaiah, what more was there to do, is God's grief. It is not a verdict on you. The Gardener is not standing in your rows with a clipboard. The Gardener is standing there with a broken heart, still loving the vineyard.

That's why Psalm 80 matters. That psalm is written from inside the wreckage. The vine God brought out of Egypt, the one that filled the land, now has its walls broken down, and everyone passing by picks its fruit. And what does the psalmist do? No five-point plan. No defense of the vine. The psalmist prays: "Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine." And that refrain keeps coming back through the psalm: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

That is not optimism. Optimism says we'll do better next year. Hope says the Gardener hasn't left. Hope prays in a burned vineyard and dares to say, "Have regard for this vine," look at us again, as if God's looking is where everything begins.

And Jesus' story ends with a stone. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Think about what that means for people who have done the hard work of sorting, of deciding what to keep and what to throw out. Some of what we've discarded, God builds with. The doubt we set aside. The part of our tradition we couldn't stomach. The part of ourselves we've been ashamed of. The person we decided didn't fit. The stone we rejected may be holding up the house.

And Paul, with the best résumé in the room, finishes his own confession this way: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." Look at the direction of that grip. Paul is not holding on to God. God is holding on to Paul. Which means the one who has it all figured out and the one still wrestling with every line of the creed stand on the same ground: held. Still pressing on. Still being made someone's own.

Which brings us to this table. Fruit of the vine. Think about it. A story about a vineyard where the owner's messengers are beaten, where his son is thrown out and killed, and the owner still hasn't quit planting. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took the fruit of the vine, the very thing the tenants withheld, and said, "This is my blood, poured out." The rejected stone becomes the table. The fruit God looked for all through Isaiah doesn't come from us straining harder. It grows where we are attached. Jesus says it plainly elsewhere: "I am the vine."

So nobody comes to this table with a résumé. Come if yours is full. Come if it's empty. Come if you're certain, and come if you're wrestling. Come tired. Come with sour grapes in your hands. Come with the stone you were told didn't fit. The table doesn't ask what you've produced. It asks only that we come and be held by the One who has already made us his own.

Please pray with me ... repeat after me

"Restore us, O God;

let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Amen.

The table is ready.