

Lectionary 27 A
Failing Expectations

October 8, 2023
Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46

The tenant farmers expect to keep the fruit for themselves. They had been working the fields for at least five years. They had nurtured and cared for those vines. They treated them as their own vines. The grapes they produced was the result of their hard work over the years. They believed that they deserved the fruit of their labors.

The landowner expected the tenants to give him the fruit. It was his land. He paid them to work the fields. The fruit belonged to him.

Neither will get what they expected.

In our first reading, the farmer has planted the best vines. He expects *ʿānavîm* – good grapes. He didn't get what he expected. He got *b^e'ushîm* – stinking, rotten grapes.

Over the last four weeks, we've heard biblical stories about people who didn't get or hear what they expected. Peter expects to forgive someone who has sinned against him as many as three times. Jesus says, "You can't count the number of times you must forgive." Peter didn't expect that.

The 12-hour workers expected to receive more pay than those who worked one hour. They all received the same. They didn't expect that.

The father expected both sons to say, "Yes," to his request that they go and work in the field. One said, "Yes," but didn't go and work. The other said, "No," but later went and worked. Neither did what the father expected.

One meaning: God can work in ways that we do not expect. Sometimes God seems more gracious than we expect.

Another meaning: We often act in ways that God does not expect us to act. That is the meaning in this parable and the reading from Isaiah. On one level, they are about the people of Israel.

God expects good fruit from his Chosen people. They failed. They stank. God sent prophets to call the people back to bearing good fruit. They ignored and sometimes killed the prophets. God sent his son to call the people back to bearing good fruit. He is crucified. He wasn't what they expected from God. God takes the vineyard – the kingdom of God – away from those who didn't give him the proper fruit, and gives it to the others.

On another level, this is a parable about the believers in Matthew's day. They can look back at how Israel treated the prophets and how the Son was treated, and also how God sent harsh judgment against his own people; but also how God had been gracious to them. They are now the ones who are given the gift of working in the vineyard – working in God's kingdom. However, they need to remember that what God had expected from those before them is now expected from them. The gift of working in the vineyard could be taken away from them, too.

This also applies to us. We, like Matthew's first hearers, are people to whom God has given the gift of working in the vineyard – in God's kingdom – and God expects a return of good fruit from us.

We learn from the tenants. They thought and acted as though the vineyard was their own property. The harvest belonged to them. They believed that they deserved the benefits of their hard work. They acted as if there was no landowner. They acted as if he had no authority or claim over them. They fight against and even kill those who want to take the fruit away from them.

“This is mine and you can’t have it.”

In one community where we lived, Wal-Mart built a new store in a depressed area. I was asked to give a blessing at the grand opening. I checked all my resources. None had a blessing for a new Walmart.

Anyway, there had been a flood a few years earlier that wiped out most of the business in that town. There were two attitudes of people who were hired to work at this new store. Some were upset that they could only get a job at a Wal-Mart. They expected much better for themselves. Others were thrilled to have a job. One man had been out of work for two years. He came to work every day full of joy because he had a job. He could take care of his family. He saw his job as a gift. He appreciated it every day – and he worked hard, because he wanted to keep this gift of a job. Their expectations made a lot of difference in their attitude.

That is how we are to see our calling to work in God’s vineyard – our calling to be God’s children – our calling as Christians in the world. It is a gift from God that we don’t deserve. We should always be thankful and joyful that God has given us this gift – a gift of being workers in God’s vineyard.

What is the fruit that God expects his workers to produce? There are a number of different answers to that question. Isaiah, in our First Reading, creates some word plays. God expects “justice,” *mishpat*, in Hebrew. He gets, *mispach*, “bloodshed.” God expects “righteousness,” *tsedaqah*. He gets *tse’aqah*, “an outcry.” “Justice” and “righteousness” are concerned with doing what is right legally and morally – for others.

The opposite of this – causing bloodshed and cries of distress – are things that indicate we’ve hurt other people – caused them pain and suffering.

Good fruit is doing what helps and benefits other people. Sometimes it will be our personal actions for others. Sometimes it will be through legal actions for others.

I might add, that when a plant bears fruit, the fruit isn’t for the benefit of the plant. An apple tree doesn’t need apples, but the apples it produces help others. It becomes food for all sorts of animals: worms, bugs, birds, people, and even elephants. They become income for farmers who raise apples as a crop.

The fruit may drop to the ground, decompose and add nutrients for the soil for the benefit of other plants. Bearing fruit is doing what benefits other people.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians talks about fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.¹ These are attitudes we have – almost always in regards to our relationship with other people.

In contrast to these, there was the attitude of the tenants in the vineyard: they are selfish. They do whatever they believe will be good for themselves: keeping the fruit, killing the slaves and the son, seeking to inherit the property, rejecting the owner’s authority over them.

The good fruit is not only our actions towards others, but also our attitude towards others. It is having the attitude of Jesus Christ. It’s an attitude of doing what will help and benefit other people – and then doing it.

There are other passages that suggest “fruit” also applied to converts – new believers in Christ. Fruit carry seeds that can produce a new plant.

Finally, our attitude also has to be that no matter how much justice and righteousness

¹ Galatians 5:22-23

and love and care we do for others. No matter how many converts we might bring into the church. No matter what the fruit looks like that we bear, it belongs to God. It's not ours. We live under the authority of the landowner. We are to live in the Kingdom of God. That is, we live as though God is the ruler of our lives.

An assistant to a bishop often complained about people who think that their congregation belongs to them, rather than to see it as God's church. This congregation belongs to God. God has given us the gift of coming together for worship and work in this place. We are God's gifts to each other.

You will have expectations of the new pastor you call. He or she will have expectations of you as a congregation. It's likely that you both will fail to meet all of the expectations. Sometimes we will stink. We are to be a forgiving group of people. We will fail. We certainly fail to live up to God's expectations. We gather each week to hear again, and to receive Christ again in bread and wine, a presence that brings forgiveness for all our failures. Christ cleanses us from our sinking sins. We are not removed from the vineyard, but forgiven and sent back into the world to seek to bear good fruit for our God.