

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
October 4, 2020

Harvest Time

Matthew 21:33-46

The fall decorating season is underway. Last Saturday, Debby and I ventured out to shop for some traditional harvest items. We returned home with some mums, a hay bale, and what turned out to be the most challenging items of all, two corn stalk bundles. I say challenging because of the effort it took, with bungee cords and tie down straps, to get the stalks secured to the top of the car, then to drive below the speed limit, pulling over from time to time to let other drivers pass by. But we, and our corn stalks, made it back home intact. They're now standing proudly on either side of a scarecrow that's resting against our lamp post.

For most of us, fall doesn't really mean a full harvest. It just means acquiring and unpacking bits and pieces of harvest symbolism that help us transition into a unique and beautiful time of the year. Unless you have a vegetable garden or a farm, the closest that most of us come to harvesting is a trip to the produce section of the grocery store. We've become very removed from the actual people and processes that produce and provide the food that's sitting there on the store shelves waiting for us to purchase it and consume it.

But in an agrarian society such as first-century Palestine, people's lives were much more directly tied to the land and to the gathering of things planted. In the life of God's people Israel, sowing and reaping were woven together with worship. The language of harvesting was used to describe God's presence and purpose, and to point forward to the culmination of God's saving work in the world. Some of Jesus' parables are stories that challenge God's people to live righteously in the present, in anticipation of the final harvest, God's judgment.

In today's text from Matthew, instead of corn stalks we have grapevines. Jesus says there was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He begins with capital layouts. That includes all the standard equipment—a fence to keep the animals out, a wine press, and a watchtower, complete with security cameras. On the lower floor of the tower, he includes a control room for video surveillance so he can have someone on his staff monitor activity on the farm 24/7. These are just basic infrastructure investments that the owner needs to make if he expects to run an efficient vineyard and maximize his harvest of fruit.

But productivity involves more than just machines and hardware. Skilled, reliable labor is also essential. So the vineyard owner posts some job openings for tenant farmers, and eventually leases the land to some online applicants who seem pretty hardworking and reputable. Turns out he should have been more diligent about doing background checks on them. But that's another part of the story that we'll get to shortly. For now, we just need to remember that having a fruitful vineyard takes land, equipment, labor, and patience.

Margaret Feinberg tells about her experience of discovering that vintners have to adopt a long-term approach to their work. She says:

The first year a vintner plants shoots of vines rather than seeds because these yield the strongest vines. At the end of the first growing season, he cuts them back. A second year passes. He cuts them back again. Only after the third year does he see his first viable clusters of grapes. Serious vintners leave those clusters on the vines. For most vintners, it's not until year four that they bring in their first harvest.

For those growing grapes for winemaking, they'll bottle their harvest, but won't taste the fruit of their labors until year seven or eight. Most vineyards in Napa Valley won't reach a breakeven point for their investment until year fifteen, eighteen or beyond.¹

The vineyard owner in Jesus' parable must be a very patient person. True, this wasn't Napa Valley, and turning a profit on fine wine may not have been his primary goal, but still, he knew that this vineyard project was a long-term project. In the story, things are really compressed. The owner leaves the tenants in charge of the vineyard, while he goes away on a journey. We don't know where he went, or for how long, but we do know it was long enough to go from planting to harvesting. And that's when things start to get violent and bloody.

With the arrival of harvest season, the owner sends some of his servants to check on how his resources are being managed and to claim his share of the fruit. Tenant farmers who worked the land for someone like him would often pay the owner half of the produce. But in this case, the tenants turn on the owner's representatives, beating one up, murdering another, and stoning a third. The incredibly merciful owner then sends another round of servants, and they too get abused and killed. Finally, the owner sends his own son, someone from his own bloodline, hoping that the tenants will respect him. But by this point, the tenants have gotten so settled into treating the property as if it's their own, they even take the son outside of the vineyard and kill him.

What began as a story about a typical arrangement between an absentee landlord and his tenant farmers has turned into a violent rebellion. In its original context, what mattered wasn't whether the parable was a realistic scenario, but what Jesus was saying to some of the religious leaders about their resistance to and rejection of the new thing that God was doing through him. Like others before them who had rejected the prophets sent by God, the leaders had taken the gift of God's reign, in other words, their relationship with God and his saving purposes for the world, and managed it so badly, to the point of saying no to God's own Son, that now God's kingdom needed to be taken away from them and placed in more trustworthy hands. That's the message Jesus was trying to communicate with this parable in its original context.

As we listen to this story in our context, our job isn't to stand comfortably behind Jesus and wave our fingers at the religious leaders, saying, "See, you Pharisees and chief priests, you need to heed Jesus' warning." Rather, we ourselves should be listening to Jesus, who puts us on notice as well, reminding us that we're expected to manage the things of God's kingdom wisely and to produce the kind of fruit that's required of the people of God.

One of the ways we do this is by living a kingdom kind of life in all the places, settings, and relationships of our daily lives—at home, in the workplace, at school, in the locations where we do business of some sort or another. These are the pieces of territory in God's world where you're called to practice and represent the will and purpose of God. You've been entrusted with relationships and resources that you're responsible for using to promote the good news of Jesus Christ.

Another way that we produce the kind of fruit that God expects of his people is in our life together in the church, especially the way that each of us carries out the particular forms of

ministry that have been given to us. Last Sunday, at the conclusion of our worship service, we voted to approve and affirm all the officers and committees presented to us by the Nominating Committee. At first glance, that kind of procedural matter can seem like a mere formality. But when we look deeper, we see that we were doing more than just putting our stamp of approval on a list of names. We were each taking responsibility for the areas of our church's work that have been placed in our hands. Deacons, Sunday School teachers, youth and children's leaders, music leaders, ushers, technology assistants, members of committees that cover everything from finances to facilities—all these, and many other places of service, are the pieces of congregational territory that have been entrusted to you for diligent and fruitful management.

I realize that during this season of our church's life, when we're journeying through circumstances we've never encountered, certain parts of our ministry are more active than others. We're looking forward to the time when we can more fully reopen other portions of our work. But as for the pieces that are up and running, continue to do and give your best to cultivating your portion of the field. Whatever your role in our congregation's mission, remember your sacred responsibility to do it faithfully, dependably, thoroughly, carefully, and wisely, in the name of Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And as for the parts of our ministry that are more idle for the present, maybe the circumstances around COVID-19 will be a season when new seeds can be planted, or seeds that were already planted are currently germinating in ways that we don't see or realize. But somehow, out of this situation, God will bring forth new kinds of fruit that we wouldn't have experienced any other way. New ways of using technology, a deeper appreciation for in-person fellowship, a greater openness to change, a deepened sense of our fragility and our dependence on the Lord.

Note that in Jesus' parable, the tenant farmers have gotten so accustomed to occupying territory that belongs to the landlord, they've begun thinking and acting as if it belongs to them. They've come to confuse stewardship with ownership. They've lost sight of the fact that they're resident on someone else's land, and in the process have developed a sense of entitlement that fuels their resistance and rebellion toward the vineyard owner.

Here is a reminder to us about the kingdom given to us through Christ, and the kingdom work entrusted to each of us. Jesus warns us about confusing service with entitlement. Otherwise, you and I can begin to think and act as if this is "my" ministry, "my" turf, something I need to guard and protect, rather than holding it lightly and letting the Lord, the real owner, use you and me for his work of cultivation and harvest.

The good news is that we worship and serve a patient God who cares deeply about having a harvest. His mercy and faithfulness persist, particularly when we take what he has placed under our management and handle it possessively. Sometimes in the life of the church, we administer the things of God's kingdom casually, half-heartedly, or foolishly. But God is steadfast in his commitment to have his people be fruitful. He doesn't take these matters lightly, and he holds us accountable for how we tend his field and manage his property. Eventually, his patience reaches its conclusion, and he comes to see what we've done with his reign. As one preacher has put it, when the owner backs up the trucks to load the harvest, what will you and I have to load?²

¹ Margaret Feinberg, "Napa Valley on Leadership." Q Shorts. www.Qideas.org.

² Adapted from Dock Hollingsworth's sermon, "Trouble at the Festival." Day 1 website. October 5, 2014. Accessed October 1, 2020 <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003a3e/trouble_at_the_festival>.