

# THERE WAS A LANDOWNER WHO PLANTED A VINEYARD...

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**MATTHEW 21:33-46; ISAIAH 5:1-7**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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I had an interesting conversation recently with a friend of mine who is a public school teacher. A few days ago, he asked his high school students the following question:

*Has religion done more harm than good in the world?*

It's an interesting question, isn't it? As with all interesting questions, so much depends upon how terms are defined.

What is meant by "religion?"

What counts as "harm" and "good?"

Is it even *possible* to talk about generic "religion?"

But qualifications aside, I was curious as to what his students thought of the question. He said that they mostly thought that religion was a bad thing.

They talked about ISIS and about the medieval crusades and some of the more hateful and nasty expressions of religion in our world. They could have talked about Canada's history of Indian Residential Schools and the church's role in this (the effects of which continue to wind their way into the present, as some remembered last night at the "Sisters in Spirit" event at Galt Gardens, remembering missing and murdered aboriginal women).

The students didn't have much that was positive to say.

And then my friend said something interesting to me. "Well, at their root, all religions arise out of a need to explain the world, to draw the boundaries around truth, and then protect it, right? It's all about our need to be *right* and to have categories of us/them. That's what leads to all the trouble."

Interesting.

I think that these are common enough sentiments, aren't they? People often embrace religions for precisely these reasons.

And what lies *behind* these instincts?

**Very often, I think it is *fear*.**

We are afraid of the many things that we *do* not know and *cannot* know in this big, mysterious world. We are afraid of death and suffering. We are often afraid of those who are different from us. We are afraid of being wrong or of wasting the time we have on this planet. We are, perhaps, even afraid of God.

Yesterday, I read an article in the *New York Times Magazine* about American author Marilynne Robinson and her forthcoming novel. Near the beginning, Robinson says this:

I hate to say it, but I think a default posture of human beings is fear.<sup>1</sup>

I do too.

I think that behind every toxic expression of religion in the world is fear.

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I think we see fear operating behind the scenes of toxic religion in our texts today.

These last few weeks in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus has been telling stories about vineyards.

Today's story represents a kind of climax to these three vineyard parables in Matthew.

In it, Jesus uses the prophet Isaiah's song of an unfruitful vineyard—a song written over half a century earlier.

Isaiah sings of a landowner who planted a vineyard. He found a fertile hill, cleared all the stones away, planted it with the best vines, built a watchtower to protect it... He did everything he could to ensure a flourishing vineyard and a bountiful crop.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/05/magazine/the-revelations-of-marilynne-robinson.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/05/magazine/the-revelations-of-marilynne-robinson.html?_r=0)

And yet, it did not yield the fruit that he wanted. It yielded “wild grapes” instead of sweet ones.

And so, in Isaiah’s song, the vineyard will be laid waste

It is the story of God and of Israel’s disobedience and idolatry, of course, as verse seven makes plain. God expected righteousness and justice, yet found bloodshed.

[Slide on the screen—“*Violence in the Vineyard*” by Jan Richardson.]

The people of Israel in Isaiah’s day would be conquered and taken into exile where they would suffer under a long string of foreign occupiers that included Babylon, Assyria, Persia, and eventually Rome.

Jesus borrows Isaiah’s framework, but takes the story in a bit of a different direction.

In Jesus’ parable, the landowner (God) leaves the vineyard and entrusts it to *tenants*.

But when harvest time comes and the landowner sends messengers to collect the produce, the tenants beat and killed them. He sends more, and they receive the same treatment.

Finally, he sends his son. The tenants decide to kill the son and get his inheritance.

The parable has taken a dark turn from the original story in Isaiah.

Not only is the vineyard failing to produce fruit, its tenants are now rejecting the landowner and his messengers.

And, as we know, and as *Jesus* knew full well, and as we will see just a few chapters later in Matthew’s gospel, the tenants will soon kill the landowner’s own son himself.

Jesus is telling a story about himself—about his role and his authority.

He is also pointing a finger directly at the religious leaders of Israel. In this parable, Jesus is speaking directly to the Jewish leaders who are questioning his authority. It is clear that he sees the Jewish leaders as the caretakers of the vineyard, which is Israel.

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So, what does this have to do with fear?

As we saw when discussing Isaiah, for many long years, the Jewish leaders had been trying to understand and protect and preserve Israel's identity in light of exile and the domination of foreign empires.

They were afraid of losing their identities, afraid of the Romans, afraid that further disobedience would lead to further trouble, afraid of losing their status as God's chosen people.

And so they did what people and groups nearly always do when they feel afraid or under threat. They drew tighter boundaries, enforced stricter rules, centralized power, emphasized severity and judgment at the expense of mercy and compassion. Some resorted to violent uprisings against their occupiers and accused all who wouldn't join them of being unfaithful.

And they drifted further and further from their very reason for being.

Jesus was a threat to these religious leaders and all that they had built. They were afraid of this strange prophet who seemed to heal and perform miracles and reinterpret the law *on his own authority*.

This is what drove them to hoard their place in the vineyard and to seek the inheritance all for themselves.

The tenants allowed their religion to grow toxic. They forgot that the point of a vineyard is to produce fruit.

The point is *still* fruit. It has *always* been fruit.

Ever since God planted his people in a garden and said, "Be fruitful and multiply," the point has been *fruit*.

Jesus makes this very plain in his interpretation of his own parable in verse 43:

"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom."

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Today is World Communion Sunday where we celebrate being part of a global body. The worldwide church, scattered around the globe, is the result of Jesus' words here

about the family of faith being extended far beyond the boundaries of ethnicity or law or tribalism, and extending to *anyone* and *everyone* who bears the fruit of the kingdom.

What is this fruit? Well, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been showing and teaching about this fruit for almost the entire twenty chapters prior to this. The fruit of the kingdom is described most clearly in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). This is what a fruitful life looks like.

Or, more succinctly, it looks like the love of God and love of neighbour. This sums up the entire law, as Jesus tells the Pharisees only one chapter further than today's text, in Matthew 22, when they attempt to test him about his knowledge of the law.

**The worldwide church is also the result of the very event the parable refers to metaphorically.**

The "landowner's son" would be killed, of course, only a few days after this parable, due to a combination of fear, anger, hardheartedness and rejection by the very ones who should have welcomed him.

But the death of the landowner's son was the punishment that brought *all* people peace. By his wounds, we are healed and cleansed, our sins are forgiven, and all who accept this sacrifice are offered the gift of new life. By this death, the doors to the kingdom are flung wide open to all.

This is what we will be remembering and celebrating in a few moments at the table.

But a final word before we get there: These stories about unfruitful vineyards are not meant to lead us to just wag our fingers at those stubborn, hardhearted religious leaders of Israel. There is a warning for us, too!

Like the religious and political elites of Israel, the church must never cling to its special status as God's "chosen people." It must never become about policing borders and enforcing laws, or ensuring that we have status in culture.

**We must never deviate from proclaiming, in word and deed, the beauty and goodness of Jesus, and of the holy task of loving God and our neighbours.**

If we do, whether as a global church, or here at Lethbridge Mennonite, I think Jesus' words will be addressed to us, too: *The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.*

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There was a landowner who planted a vineyard... He cleared it, planted the choicest of vines, set a watchtower over it, and looked forward to good fruit...

The next move is ours.

May God help his church—here and around the world—to produce the fruit of the kingdom.

Amen.

