

The Song of the Vineyard

Scriptures

Isa 5:1-7

Ps 80:7-19

Phil 3:14-21

Matt 21:33-44

Opening: The Song of Rejection

Well it's been a minute since I've stood in this pulpit. I had to stand aside to await a COVID test a while back, then a week away in the mountains. Last time I was here we were talking about music and songs.

A while back Fr Thomas had us consider what song, what kind of melody we sing with our faith. So I'm going bring back the musical motif, drawing on another song form that one needs in time of sadness, especially during one's teenage years—the breakup song. Here in Appalachia our songwriters perfected the art form that is the breakup song. The titles say all they need to say: "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" by Hank Williams Sr., "I Fall to Pieces" by Patsy Cline, "I Will Always Love You," by Dolly Parton, "Always On My Mind" by Willie Nelson.

When I got dumped my freshman year in high school, I called on Bonnie Raitt for comfort as she sang "I Can't Make You Love Me." My family doesn't think I like country music, which isn't true. I don't like country music written after 1996.

I didn't know a thing about real love at age 14, but that song made all the sense in the world to me. When you've been rejected, the only song you can sing is a song of unrequited love.

Isaiah's Tragic Love Song

"Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard..." You don't know this is a sad love song when Isaiah begins singing. What you hear is the reckless love of God for his people. The church fathers described God's love for his people as "manikon erotikon"; a manic, mad love, a crazy love. This is God's manic love song for his people.

God is a lover and God is a gardener. He created a garden in the beginning; a garden in which he would live and move among his beloved children. When the Adam and Eve rejected his love, the Lord did not reject them forever. From their sons and daughters he developed a new garden plan—a vineyard. From Egypt God the lover rescued his beloved Israel and brought them to a new Eden, Canaan. They inherited a vineyard they didn't plow or plant. Because God is a lover.

The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting.

All God the lover desired from this new garden, this vineyard was the fruit of justice—goodness and mercy for the poor. He looked for the fruit of righteousness—kindness, peace, and love. But when he looked for justice, behold bloodshed. When he searched for righteousness, behold the cry of distress. The blood of Abel cries again from the vineyard's ground.

In Eden, God said to Adam, "Where are you?" In his vineyard he cries out, "What more was there to do my vineyard that I have not done in it?" God has a manic love for his people. There's no other explanation for a lover who is rejected as much as God is. So we hear his song of rejected love while violence ruins the vineyard he made for peace.

Parable

Turning to the parable of the vineyard, we hear a story, not a song. Yet a musical principle opens this story for us. The French composer Claude Debussy said “The music is not in the notes, but in the silence between.” Rests, brief moments of silence, are the inaudible foundation of a melody. So also this parable.

When we heard this story moments ago, did you notice what happened, or rather what *didn't* happen, when these tenants became violent at first? *The master of the house doesn't retaliate and he doesn't exact swift judgment upon them.* He has full legal right in this world for a swift eviction. That's not what happens. I hear the echo of the Psalms speaking after the first acts of violence:

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, **nor will he keep his anger forever.**¹

The Lord holds back his hand and so does this vintner. He is patient with his servants in their rebellion.

He aims to end this violence, to reap his vineyard's harvest by another way—he sends more servants to the tenants in the second visitation. Instead of standing down, the tenants escalate their violence more than the first confrontation. Again, the master doesn't retaliate; he doesn't bring immediate judgment on them.

Finally, he sends his son. All the codes of this culture permit legal action to punish these rebels. Instead of pursuing rightful justice, this winegrower chooses a direction that makes one question either his backbone or his sanity. Into the fray he sends his son. The attack on the son shows us three things:

- How normal violence has become for these tenants

¹Psalm 103:8–9 (ESV)

The Song of the Vineyard

- A hostile takeover is underway to seize power and wealth in this vineyard
- The father risks his son's life to restore this vineyard's harvest

I should pause for a moment and recall the time, place, and people listening to this bizarre story. Our Lord Jesus tells this story on a Monday, the day after he came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Not a chariot, not a warhorse, a donkey. "Behold your king is coming to you, humble and riding on donkey."²

Telling this story on Monday after Palm Sunday means Jesus has four days remaining until he falls into the hands of sinners and they nail him to a cross. Our Lord tells this story in the Temple among high priests and scribes (theologians). They were the appointed guardians of the Lord's vineyard. They were entrusted with the work of righteousness and justice. But when he came looking for justice, behold bloodshed.

So now we can see this parable was being told *and* it was happening in real time. The master sent his son to redeem his vineyard. Surely they will listen to the son.

But before the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, entered the gates of the holy city, numerous prophets had been sent before him. The prophets are the first two servants sent to this vineyard. What is the role of the prophet? Tell the truth. Proclaim the Word of God, even though you be shouted down, shut down, and rejected.

And so our Lord Jesus was the final servant in a procession of martyred prophets, willing to suffer for the truth of God, sent to redeem the vineyard from its violence and bloodshed. Before Jesus came, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah all suffered for telling the truth of God to the people of God. To the prophets and to the greatest Son, they say "Stop talking. We're in control here"³ Even still Jesus says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." It's a manic love.

²Zechariah 9.9

³Jeremiah 11.21

Section 2

It's harrowing to read this story in 2020, in an outrage culture, a culture of escalating violence, a cancel culture. Read the Bible and you'll find that cancel culture is nothing new. It's as old as the rejected and martyred prophets of the Old Testament. The impulse to silence the Word of God runs deep. It's writ large in our culture right now, but it's not something that's outside of me; apart from me. Isaiah's song and Jesus' parable confront us with the searing truth, with the impulse buried deep in our ancestors' history, deep in our sin nature that we want power, not prophets. There's a deep resistance within me to repent; to say "I was wrong"; to admit "I've been hateful, I've been foolish."

The Lord's servants have suffered violence for well over 2000 years because they speak truth and *live* the truth of God revealed in the Scriptures. The Lord's servants were willing to suffer violence because they were seeking the power of God, not the power of this world.

We are living in dangerous times of escalating violence and it's crucial we understand the find the root of this escalating violence: our culture has made an idol of the false god of power. Now, power is not evil in itself. Power is given by God for the sake of goodness. But like all idols, power becomes a demon when it is worshipped. /

False gods are never displaced without a fight. And when we're talking about the false god of power, the fight becomes more violent than it is when renouncing other idols like sexuality. For all their differences, on the right and on the left, and even in the middle, our nation finds common ground worshipping the god of power. Our nation has bent its knee to the god of power. And behold bloodshed.

White supremacy is evil, and beneath the wickedness of racial hatred and violence there is the worship of power. Left wing anarchist groups have embraced evil ideologies, too, using violence and rioting to attack institutions and leaders that God uses to establish peace in our cities. Left wing radicals, too, are bending the knee to the false god of power.

It's not been this urgent, at least in my lifetime, that the saints of God embrace the cross of Jesus Christ and renounce the false gods of power. *To embrace the cross and renounce the false god of power means suffering for the Gospel.*

Our Lord Jesus said the gates of hell would not stand against his Church, but that *Church is built on the rejected cornerstone that is his Body*. Jesus warned the church leaders of his day that he would give his kingdom to others who lived righteously. Don't think we're exempt from the same warnings. Apostasy is possible. All three temptations Jesus faced in the desert were temptations to abuse his power to worship power. Just as Jesus was tempted, so do his saints face the same temptation from our Enemy.

We've born witness against heresies in our time, false doctrines regarding the Virgin Birth, physical resurrection, Jesus' uniqueness, and human sexuality. Now we must keep watch against the heresies of worldly power. You know why? Because the Church of Jesus Christ is built upon the rejected cornerstone of Christ's Body. To be living stones of his temple, our suffering has to fit with his suffering.

A Continual Renunciation

When I stand before parents bringing their children to baptism (as we will next Sunday on All Saints Day), I take them to the back of the church to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil. They face outward as a physical symbol of rejecting the idols of this world. The fruit of righteousness, goodness, justice, and peace will not grow without renunciations against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

When the church loses her spiritual power, when she refuses her prophetic vocation to speak the Truth of God in a culture of lies, you'll see a pattern. We renounced the evil forces of wickedness once upon a time, but the first renunciation didn't become a lifestyle, *an entire life committed to repentance*.

Here's a contrast that's written in plain sight: no one, from politicians down to your Facebook Feed, is willing to say "I was wrong." Compare that rancor to our liturgy each Sunday morning. We confess our sins and *pledge* our repentance every week. Look at the liturgy of Morning Prayer. Confession and repentance is *the first prayer of the day*. We begin the day with repentance.

The Imitation of Redemptive Suffering

Sure, these matters have great importance in light of next months' election, but I assure you my eyes are fixed on a different horizon. This isn't the most consequential election in our lifetime. That status will expire on November 4, or whenever a winner is declared. Rest assured the next election will then become the most consequential election of our lifetime. It's always the next one, and then the next one, and then the next one. You know why? Because in our time, we're bending the knee to power rather than bending the knee to the Suffering Servant of God, Jesus Christ, who calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

My eyes are on a different horizon than this election or the next or the next. I'm thinking of the faith I will pass on to my children. I'm thinking of the children to whom we've pledged vows when they were bathed in water and named by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When I come to the end of my days, will our children have seen in us examples of suffering for the sake of the Gospel? I suspect my generation and those who follow after me will be called to suffer for the Gospel more than my parents or grandparents' generation. What example will I give them?

The Apostle Paul wasn't reluctant to tell his churches "Imitate me." You know why? It wasn't because of ego. He knew he was suffering for the Gospel and he was calling them to imitate his faithful suffering. "Brothers, join in imitating me, and *keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.*" Paul was confident in his life and his example because he wasn't afraid to suffer for the Gospel.

We're writing that story *right now*. Go vote, but know your legacy won't be in the voting booth; your legacy lies with your willingness to embrace the cross of Jesus when it's most costly.

Abba Moses

I've been compelled to read stories of martyrs, not only to myself, but to begin that discipline with my children. Let me tell you a martyr story in closing. I want you to know the story of our desert father, Abba Moses. Abba Moses lived in Africa where he grew up a

slave. He was so unruly, though, that his master released him. Moses became a gang leader in his day, leading bands of criminals, inflicting violence and murder when needed.

After completing one particular raid, for an unknown reason, Moses walked into a monastery. The Lord convicted him of his sin and he became a Christian and took vows as a monk.

Moses then set out to root out the violent habits of his life, to confront the hatred in his heart for his brothers. One day four robbers attacked him in the monastery and he resisted the attack without harming them. Experience kicked in and he reportedly tied up each man “like a package.” Moses believed he had no authority to punish these men, so he led them to the elders of the monastery and asked them, “Since I may not hurt anyone, what do you want me to do with these men?” The dilemma was resolved when these four men recognized this was the notorious Moses. They couldn’t believe a strong and powerful thief like Moses could change, so these robbers too became Christians. ⁴

Abba Moses fought long and hard against the enmity in his heart toward his neighbors. After a long struggle, you can hear the fruit of righteousness in these wise instructions from Abba Moses:

⁴Palladius, *Palladius: The Lausiaca History*, eds. Johannes Quasten, Walter J. Burghardt, and Thomas Comerford Lawler, *Ancient Christian Writers*. (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1964), 34.

Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Eds., *Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series*. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 2.

Do evil to nobody nor keep any evil in your heart against anyone. Do not belittle a wrong-doer; do not be influenced by one who wrongs his neighbor and do not rejoice with one who does wrong to his neighbor. Do not slander anybody but say: 'God knows each one.' Do not agree with one who slanders; neither rejoice with him in his slandering nor hate him who slanders his neighbor—and this is 'judge not that you be not judged' Lk 6:37. Do not be at enmity with anybody and do not foster enmity in your heart; do not hate one who is at enmity with his neighbor—and this is peace. Console yourself with this: there is labor for a short while then repose for eternity, by the grace of the divine Word. Amen ⁵

Abba Moses died beside seven brothers in Christ. A band of raiders attacked their monastery. Abba Moses and his brothers did not resist. They became martyrs of the cross of Christ together.

The church father Tertullian said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." We might improvise that and say all saints who suffer produce the fruit of righteousness in the Lord's vineyard. Their faithfulness and obedience is the answer to God's love song. In my heart his love will not be rejected. In my life I will live and proclaim his truth no matter the cost, and for the glory of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵John Behr, ed., Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers, trans. John Wortley, vol. 52, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 198.