

Moving Onward Isaiah 5:1-7; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46; Psalm 80:7-15 10-2-2011

We often think that the parable form of story telling is in *the* domain of Jesus alone. But, the Hebrew Scriptures are also full of parables that Jesus sometimes used as a base for some of his illustrations. In today's readings we see two parables that are basically the same. They are all about vineyards that have been planted by God for those God loves and God's disappointment when all goes wrong with the inhabitants and tenants.

In both cases the people put in charge of the vineyards were to protect and grow the faith tradition. Both groups failed. The offenders are supposed to judge themselves and discover where it is they are lacking. It seems the light bulb of understanding goes on for the Pharisees and they add one more stick to the load that finally broke their collective camel's back. They understood that they were the tenants who were hired to oversee the vineyard, the tradition of their faith, and all they did was bring about its destruction by murdering the son of the owner. They withdrew, recognizing that the crowds were with his charismatic man, Jesus. They knew that it would not be a good time to strike—not yet. They wanted to maintain the structure that had kept them in business for a long time, so they waited and watched piling up evidence against him.

Paul, in his Letter to the Philippians, gave some clues how to protect and grow the faith. He wrote that his life had been turned around by his knowledge of the life and teachings of Jesus. And, that is how it should be for those of us who claim to follow Christ. Our lives need to be turned around and we need to remember the essentials upon which our faith rests. Paul reminded those who read and still read this letter that it was important to forget the past and press forward in life. His mission was to further the kingdom of God by spreading the good news of Jesus far and wide. He held on to the essence of what he had learned following

his conversion and tried to bring a new way of viewing life to those who would listen.

So, what does this have to do with us? Well, we are the present tenants in the vineyard. We are the ones charged with protecting the basis of our faith. Things may change all around us and we may discover new ways of viewing God, but, the essential teachings remain the same even when seen through a changing focus.

Whether we clearly see it or not, things have been changing a lot in the past few decades. The relevance of the church is often questioned. An institution, which once was respected in most homes, has lost strength. This has been a long time coming and I am not sure that we will ever recapture the prominence the church once had in our communities. People want us to be where we are when they need us. But other times, they cannot be bothered. There is a lot of competition for their time and very little of it to spare.

Those of us who believe there is great value in having an enduring and sustaining relationship with God will have to be the ones who continue to press onward. We will need to examine new ways of having relevance for our communities, new ways of doing church and redefining what is meant as religion. This is not an easy task and the laborers are few. However, there is always hope that the vineyard will attract new workers who will be determined to join in holding things together for the good of all.

We, as the base, need to reflect to all we encounter the love, forgiveness, hospitality, hope and joy of God revealed to us through the life and teachings of Christ. We need to be the ones who tend the vineyard keeping it alive and productive.

There is a verse from one of our hymns that sings:

“Are ye able?” Still the Master Whispers down eternity.

And heroic spirits answer, Now as then in Galilee.

Lord, we are able. Our spirits are thine.

Remold them, make us, like Thee divine.

Thy guiding radiance above us shall be a beacon to
God, to love and to loyalty.”

Let us hope we know that we are able to move forward to
establish a bit of the Kingdom of God right where we are.

Amen