

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 22 Year A

It's interesting that many of us do not remember this parable of Jesus in our gospel story today, even though it is in each of the synoptic gospels, even though it is in a crucial time in the storyline leading up to Jesus' crucifixion, as it comes in what we have termed "Holy Week" when Jesus is intentionally disrupting the temple practices after triumphantly riding into Jerusalem, even though we have had the visceral reaction to the previous story of the workers in the vineyard, where we have caught a glimpse of what the kingdom of God looks like which is one of grace and generosity. But this story we tend to dismiss or forget, perhaps because we have incorrectly interpreted it in the past, and felt the ones Jesus is criticizing are not us, but those religious leaders in the temple of Jerusalem, in a time long ago and in a faraway place, and we certainly couldn't be like they are, consumed with their religious practices and failing to show and be the love of God in the world. .

It is true, Jesus was condemning the religious leaders, scribes and elders of his time in the midst of a Passover celebration, whose spiritual failure was to miss the not so subtle shift they had made from being guardians of the faith tradition to being its owners, from being humble servants of God to being proud possessors of the authority of God, to using God's laws to exclude people, rather than draw and form them into a community of believers, from living out of covenant with God through obedience to God's will to rejecting God's own Being manifested in the person of Jesus – and we may shake our heads at the ignorance or arrogance of "those people in the past" and fail to see how this story connects with our own lives.

We can certainly understand the parable Jesus commands us to listen to in today's gospel as an allegory, with God being the landowner, who has set up the vineyard perfectly, eagerly wishing the harvest to be robust and abundant, able to feed all those hungry for the Word, and the religious leaders to be the wicked tenants, who didn't want to give back to God what was God's to begin with and what belongs to God, who treated poorly any prophet who came to draw them back into an obedient and loving relationship with God, and who ultimately killed God's own Being, rather than imagining a new way, filled with a sweetness of the harvest of new wine.

And yet, that unfolding of the parable can cast the judgment upon others, when, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit there seems to be a human tendency to want to hold onto privilege or status that we have somehow wrenched from others as the tenant farmers had done, or a desire to possess that which does not belong to us, God's harvest, or distort religious practices or rituals which are designed to open God into the very souls of all people to be that which isolates, alienates or excludes those most in need of God's healing touch or to hang onto the guideposts, designed to usher us along the way into our destination, or worse yet, turn the guideposts into our own "gods". This is the danger brought forward in today's stories, our markers along the way become the way. For as Martin Luther said, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, that is really your god. God expects that we look into our own lives and hearts to examine truthfully our gods, our allegiances, our worship, our faithfulness." This is the work we are invited into this morning by all of our lessons—to examine where we have gotten stuck along the way, holding too tightly onto the harvest as though it is ours, and finding our heart can too easily settle upon a guidepost along the way, rather than keeping our focus on the Way of Love, through which we will find living and Risen Christ.

I imagine it has not been foreign to any of our ears to hear people rebel or refuse to continue to come to church when a new prayer book is introduced, or the style of music changes from one season to another in the life of a church, or (heaven forbid), when pews are removed and chairs are installed for more flexibility of worship space. People refuse to give to God's harvest through their financial giving as new programs emerge and develop and others are put to rest, and positions change and energy in the parish shifts, when we realize that we had come to worship that which we did, or the position we held in the community, or that which we saw or heard whose beauty opened our hearts, or that which we knew to be true as a set of static beliefs. Those beautiful and faithful acts of worship and service, we startle into realization, have become that which we worship, rather than God.

Clearly during our pandemic time, we have experienced this phenomenon, when that which we counted on drawing us into the holy, was suddenly not available, and our souls had to actively let go of our practices or activities or patterns of being with each other and with God and wander a bit, sometimes a lot, in the wilderness, until new guideposts into the depths of the holy were revealed by God. Part of our faith journey is to trust that when we hold onto something too tightly, even something wonderful and foundational to our faith, or something that has been helpful in our quest for an enlivening relationship with God, we have stalled out on our journey, and we need to again hold our faith with "open hands", always imagining with God there will be new ways to encounter the holy.

Our lessons today guide us into an exploration of the purpose of our external guideposts along the way and their relationship to the development of our inner moral and spiritual compass. Clearly our reading from Genesis and the offering of the covenant through the 10 commandments, can speak to us of those actions and stances of our heart that will open up and enliven our relationship first with God, but then with others. The reasoning behind these laws or commandments upon our behavior is that if practiced faithfully and consistency, with perseverance and almost stubbornness, and if attentiveness is given to when we have missed the mark and we take the opportunity to repent and stretch our minds to that which is a more faithful response, these outward guideposts will become our inner compass, and when that happens, it doesn't mean the guideposts disappear from our sight, but it does mean that we can lean into and trust this our deepest experience, of the risen Christ, all day, every day—and as Richard Rohr, a current Catholic theologian says, "and this will happen before and after you ever go to any kind of religious service."

It is not unlike our deep belief in the Episcopal Church that praying shapes believing – what and how we pray, the words we use, the music we allow to settle into our souls, the joy we feel as we gather for worship, the sound of our footsteps as we make the pilgrimage to the altar, or the feel of the hard pew upon our knees, how we intentionally open ourselves in communication with God, will shape our beliefs. It is at this point, we recognize that beliefs is more than a set of religious constructs, but rather a heart stance that allows our heart to trust and to follow the Spirit into a natural and faithful way of being and living in the world. The outer guideposts of practice, routine, and ritual have drawn us into the place our hearts have always been drawn toward—and yet have been beyond our imagination and own initiative. That's our deepest prayer—the world around us has become a sacrament – an outward and visible expression of inner grace. We are blessed by the external moments we can't hold or possess, but which strengthen and enliven the real work of faith – our trust and love of God that draw us to right action in the world.

That's our deepest spiritual desire – the development of our inner compass, always directing us toward our best response, even if it is not our first response, always plunging us down into the right moral action, even if our emotional response wishes to lead us into resentment, bitterness, or wrong desire, always caring more about relationships than being “right”, always desiring to respond in heart, mind, body and soul, out of our love of God, not from our place of ego. It's a deep dive into the interior space of our soul – the God part each of us holds within.

That image of an inner compass says so much. In our spiritual lives it is an inner compass which makes the difference between being religious and being spiritual. A religious person is a good person, someone who depends on and holds fast to the external compass. And God has given us some wonderful external compasses such as scripture, tradition, reason (our 3-legged stool of the Anglican church), the institution of the church, the history of the church and our spiritual ancestors, such as the prophets, apostles, and of course, the historical Jesus. All of these are meant to direct us into the holy, point us toward God, so our lives are transformed, and we develop the heart stance that is guided by these outward and visible signs of our faith, but goes much deeper, into the creation and formation of an active spiritual life.

Trouble occurs when we are not prepared to grow from being a religious person into a spiritual one, when we resist being guided by an external compass into an internal one. We can be so addicted to the external compasses that suddenly it is all about crossing the “t's” and dotting the I's or praying with the right words, or following traditional protocol to the exclusion of the insight and imagination of the Holy Spirit, or imagining the rituals of the church to “be the church”, or to imagine who can be “in” and who can be “out” based upon some arbitrary rules. All of this has very little to do with loving God or enjoying God's company, or with finding our identity with God; knowing who we are, not through what we have or do not have, but because each of us is a child of God and nothing, absolutely nothing, can erase our baptism. If we depend too much on external compasses, we become dysfunctional in our relationship with God and we imagine that God always owes us something, for somehow we feel we own a part of God, just like the wicked tenants in the vineyard—the harvest becomes ours, not God's - -and God is wondering what went terribly wrong in the vineyard.

A truth we learn today is that we should never fall in love with our guideposts, only with God. We shouldn't fall in love with or feel we cannot worship if – there is no singing – or if someone is sitting in “my pew”. You should never leave a church or stop giving to God's work because a fellow member's actions or words anger or upset you.

The church does not belong to any one person or group; it is a gift from God, it belongs to all of us. I tell you, as a priest I am encouraged to know the reasons people find and join our parish. The nearly universal response almost always is– “I felt a wall of love when I walked in the door” or that people were so welcoming – or that there was an openness here to be good to one another. I'd like to translate that sentiment to say that people find and join us because our inner compass -our turn toward and life in God – is what is visibly manifested here – and it is that – the presence of God which people connect to. If that is true, then thanks be to God. We're doing it right. One of God's greatest desires, I have to believe, is that one day there will be no need for a reliance on external compasses because people will have the law of God written in their hearts. This of course does not mean we will throw religion out, but rather hold it lightly, as a pathway as it was intended, not the end. And we can make that true here and now, within each of our hearts and within our community,

gathered as the Body of Christ, in heart and spirit, for we can tend to the vineyard within our hearts and offer the harvest to God's kingdom.

Can one be religious and not spiritual? Absolutely. Religious people are good people who often cling tightly to the guideposts (a particular way of doing something) and get stuck along the way of love. Can one be spiritual and not religious? Absolutely. The presence of the holy is everywhere, within each one of us, and with our own spiritual practices developed we can abide in this holy place, without the dogma of the church attached to the pure presence of God. And yet, I must tell you, there is this amazing sweet spot, when religion and spiritual join together, when our path into the holy is widened and broadened and deepen by the truth we find of God through our religious beliefs. Oh, that's my deepest desire for you – that you, and I, and our parish can abide there. Amen.