

“At Work in the Vineyard”

The Rev Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages  
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Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Matthew 21:33-47

[Jesus said,]

“There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it,  
dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower.

Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.”

Matt. 21:33b

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to be good tenants as members of the UCC at The Villages

while we are at work in this part of your vineyard

and may our ministries here produce a good harvest.

Amen

There is a vineyard not far from here –

about 30 miles south and east.

They invite visitors to learn about how they produce bottled wine,  
beginning with a short film showing the way the vines are planted,  
cultivated, and the grapes harvested.

Then, they give you a little tour through the main building,  
showing everyone the equipment and techniques of winemaking.

At last, everyone is guided to the shop where samples are served.

And the fields there are beautiful – and vast,  
stretching out almost as far as the eye can see.

[Did you notice how quickly I moved from the taste-testing part?]

You could imagine things get pretty busy there at harvest-time twice a year,  
but there is a lot of waiting-time, too.

So, winetasting tours – along with cleaning the equipment in between harvests  
are part of the job, too.

It's seasonal work – kind of like Florida churches between October and May –  
but we could extend that view of church “work” to a broader vista  
of the work of the ‘Church’ with a capital ‘C’ throughout history.

There have been long stretches of waiting for things to happen  
and there have been times in Church history when ‘the tenants’  
of a particular era were irresponsible.

Sometimes, messengers of change were rejected, mistreated, and even killed,  
but later vindicated for the progress they stood for.

Perhaps we are living in such times.

Willard, p.2

In the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John,

Jesus revealed his identity as the Messiah to a Samaritan woman.  
She was not only part of an ethnic group despised by Jewish Galileans,  
but she was rejected by her own people for her adulterous behavior.  
After her encounter with Jesus she found the courage to accept herself  
and re-connect with society – running off to tell the people of her village  
about Jesus.

When the disciples came back from shopping in that same village.

they offered Jesus something to eat, but he tells them,

‘I have food to eat that you do not know about...’

My food is to do the will of [the One] who sent me  
and to complete his work.’

Then, Jesus tells them,

‘...Look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.’

There are fields ripe for harvesting around us

as a congregation of the United Church of Christ.

The world is reeling from sectarian violence;

Our society is split by political affiliations;

And like other religions, the Church with a capital “C”

is torn by literal fundamentalism and progressive liberalism.

And economic hardship is everywhere – people are hungry... for the truth.

So, as challenging as things may seem in the world today,

it is also a time of great hope – people are looking to find their way.

The danger may lie in what people settle for – better or worse or

the same old thing that hasn’t been working but with a different label.

Stock market reports, doctors’ reports, and report cards

sometimes carry the bad news that life is not always as it should be.

But it is in the midst of such assessments of our reality

that the Kingdom of God can also be discovered in our midst.

We can be rich even when our resources are limited.

We can be healed even when we can’t find a cure.

We can be free even when we face limitations.

When we are ‘in Christ’, we are no longer alone;

no longer wandering aimlessly; or at the mercy of the powerful;

but we have a life purpose greater than ourselves .

We no longer have to fear death,

for we can take hope that there is a life yet to come.

Willard, p.3

Yet, we must still work to unite with others – to make that connection.

We must still work to align our lives with God's purpose for us – to love.

We must still work for cures – in spite of death.

We must still work to oppose institutional evils

like predatory financial practices that lead to poverty.

We must oppose institutional racism and gender-specific sexism  
that lead to bullying and violence.

We must oppose environmental neglect that leads to a wasteland.

Walter Rauschenbusch was a Baptist pastor and theologian, credited as  
the "Father of the Social Gospel" movement of 19<sup>th</sup> Century America

[So, a contemporary of Leo Tolstoy], and he said,

'It is not a matter of getting individuals into a heaven,

but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven.'

Or to put it another way,

"Salvation is not just about getting people into heaven,  
but about getting heaven into people."

Rauschenbusch sought to translate evangelical fervor into action –  
specifically to promote 'compassion, justice, and social change'  
in the public sector.

According to an internet source about Rauschenbusch –

whose name by the way literally means "Burning Bush":

*He took seriously the equality of love embodied in Jesus' admonition  
that we love our neighbors as ourselves.*

*Between 1886 and 1897, he was pastor of the Second German Baptist Church  
in the "Hell's Kitchen" area of New York City,  
an area of extreme poverty.*

*As he witnessed massive economic insecurity,*

*he began to believe that Christianity must address  
the physical as well as the spiritual needs of humankind.*

*He developed an understanding of discipleship*

*that made the spirit of Christianity the core of social renewal.*

*As a professor at Rochester Theological Seminary  
from 1902 until his death in 1917,*

*he developed a theology for the social gospel that emphasized that  
sin is not just a private matter between a person and God,  
but in the spirit of the prophets,  
there are also social sins against humanity  
that must be addressed for Christianity to have any relevance.*

<http://www.rauschenbusch.org/rauschenbusch.htm>

Willard, p.4

There is the work that must be accomplished within a person as well  
in order to effectively do God's work in this world.

We must cultivate our personal relationship with God in Christ.

In John 15, Jesus said,

<sup>5</sup>'I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,  
because apart from me you can do nothing.'

And he said,

<sup>8</sup>'My [Abba] Father is glorified by this,  
that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.'

So, as Christians of the United Church of Christ,

this work of being a Christian means sharing the hope  
we have as a church that brings others together,  
united and uniting communities of goodwill;

And it also means cultivating the individual experience

of being present with God – to be open and affirming  
of our connection with God and one another

through Christ who said,

'I am the vine, you are the branches... apart from me you can do nothing.'

And this is represented every time we share Holy Communion

with each other and as a congregation of that wider Church –  
the Church with a capital "C".

This is represented when we share bread made from grain

harvested, crushed, processed by people we never met,  
and baked for us to eat;

It is represented when we share the cup of the fruit of the vine,

harvested, crushed, processed by people we never met,  
and bottled for us to drink.

We are benefitting from the work that generations before us had done

and the time is now for us to do our part to work in the vineyards  
to bring in the harvest of the next generation of believers

and nurture our relationship with God and one another  
as branches of that Great Vine, the Body of Christ,  
the Church with a capital "C".

And the work we are to do is summed up in the 10 Commandments

which Jesus condensed into one:

'...that [we] love one another as [God through Christ has] loved [us].

Amen

*Our Jewish scripture lesson today is The Ten Commandments  
which are found in Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20.  
They are a summary of what it means to live responsibly  
in relationship with our God and with one another.*

20:1 Then God spoke all these words:

2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,  
out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me.

4 You shall not make for yourself an idol,  
whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above,  
or that is on the earth beneath,  
or that is in the water under the earth.

7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God,  
for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.  
<sup>9</sup>For six days you shall labour and do all your work.

12 Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long  
in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

13 You shall not  
murder.

14 You shall not  
commit adultery.

15 You shall not  
steal.

16 You shall not  
bear false witness against your neighbour.

17 You shall not covet your neighbour's house;  
you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave,  
or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

18 When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning,  
the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking,  
they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance,

<sup>19</sup>and said to Moses,  
'You speak to us, and we will listen;  
but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.'

<sup>20</sup>Moses said to the people,  
'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you  
and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.'

Matthew 21:33-47

[Jesus said,]

<sup>21:33</sup> ‘Listen to another parable.

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it,  
dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower.

Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.

<sup>34</sup>When the harvest time had come,

he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.

<sup>35</sup>But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another,  
and stoned another.

<sup>36</sup>Again he sent other slaves, more than the first;  
and they treated them in the same way.

<sup>37</sup>Finally he sent his son to them, saying,

“They will respect my son.”

<sup>38</sup>But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves,

“This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.”

<sup>39</sup>So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard,  
and killed him.

<sup>40</sup>Now when the owner of the vineyard comes,  
what will he do to those tenants?’

<sup>41</sup>They said to him,

‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death,  
and lease the vineyard to other tenants

who will give him the produce at the harvest time.’

<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them,

‘Have you never read in the scriptures:

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;  
this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes”?

<sup>43</sup>Therefore I tell you,

the kingdom of God will be taken away from you  
and given to a people that produces  
the fruits of the kingdom.

<sup>44</sup>The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces;  
and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.’

<sup>45</sup> When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables,  
they realized that he was speaking about them.

<sup>46</sup>They wanted to arrest him,

but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.