

16 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 22 – Year A – October 2, 2011
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46
Susan E. Wilmot

Some time ago, when our friend's kids were just hitting double digits in age, we had this great idea to adapt the snakes and ladders board game into "the pie-in-the-face-game". We added a few extra snakes to the board, and had some additional rules, just to make it more interesting. The player who reaches "home" first has the privilege of squishing a pie of whipped cream into the face of the one who was last on the board. Everyone else was safe, and could just enjoy the fun! As we all know, getting a pie in the face is a humbling experience, period.

It could be that by the time we've finished looking at today's parable, quite a few of us will feel like the pie just hit us in the face. In last week's Gospel, the leaders of the Temple try to trap Jesus, but discover that conversations with Jesus can be dangerous indeed. It ends with Jesus' exasperated declaration to the Judean leaders, "and even after you saw it," that is the droves of people who believe in John the Baptist's message of repentance and his ways of righteousness, "you did not change your minds and believe him". The same is also true of their response to Jesus. He is denied and rejected at every turn, except by the common people. The leaders are playing the world's game, stubbornly relying on the old rules, and refusing to acknowledge Jesus' authority or teaching. They just want to crush Jesus, in order to protect their power and status. What they haven't realized is that God has changed the rules. What's always worked for the leaders in the past is about to crumble in the tsunami surrounding Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and subsequent events. Instead of landing on a ladder of insight and righteousness, the leaders of the Temple have demonstrated their true affinity as a brood of vipers.

Matthew's parable of the wicked tenants follows immediately from last week's story. It's just as powerful now, as it was in Jesus' day, because of what it reveals about us, God's kingdom and grace, and about Jesus. In its original context, this is an allegorical story with enough Scriptural references and allusions to drive home the point Jesus is making. The traditional interpretation is that Israel is the vineyard, the leaders are the tenant farmers, Jesus is the son, and God is the householder. However, the supposition of the tenants that if they kill the son, they'll inherit the vineyard, stretches the bounds of credulity. As with any allegory, we can't nail it all down neatly and precisely, nor should we, or we risk missing the point. In other words, however hard we try, we cannot put God in a box. The moment we think we've got God pinned down, we suddenly notice that He's made the winning move, and we're the one with whipped cream splattered in our face.

Two of the key scriptural references come from chapters 5 and 8 of the prophet Isaiah. Another is from Psalm 118. Isaiah 5:1-7 identifies Israel as the vineyard of the Lord of hosts. Jewish commentary associates the vineyard with the Temple and the rejection of the prophets. The escalating violence in the story sums up the violent response of the Temple leaders towards God's prophets, and portends Jesus' own impending death. In Isaiah 8:14-15 the Lord of hosts is a stone over whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem stumble. Isaiah declares God's judgment due to the acts of injustice wrought by Israel's leaders. The quote from Psalm 118 is about the stone that the builders rejected. It also contains the words of blessing that Jesus heard at his triumphant entry to Jerusalem. Psalm 118 is traditionally sung at the Passover, celebrating God's steadfast love and His deliverance of Israel from bondage and slavery in Egypt.

That's all great to know, but can seem like ancient history until we take an honest look at our own lives, our own unbelief, and our own ways of rejecting Jesus. Most of us take at least some pride in the fact that we are generally good Christians. We're pretty comfortable with who we are in Christ, with our faith and trust in Him, and the assurance of our salvation. We may well think that we have a foot on the ladder of righteousness, or are even a few steps up. We may also find that in our hubris, there's a cream pie about to land in our face. That's mostly because we, like the Judean leaders, actually have a hard time accepting the

expansive nature of God's grace and inclusiveness for those who come in faith. What we really want is God to adhere strictly to the Law, especially the Ten Commandments that we also heard this morning. That would keep out the riff raff wouldn't it? Unfortunately for us, given Jesus' interpretation of some of those Ten Commandments like "You have heard that it was said ... 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment" (Matthew 5:21-22), we might have a little problem being part of the in crowd ourselves. It's hard to believe that God's ways are not our ways. I certainly could select all kinds of people that I don't think deserve a place in God's kingdom. I bet you can too. They're the same kind of miserable wretches that the leaders in our story say God should put to death. They're the same children of God that we so often work to exclude from His grace, and kingdom in all kinds of ways. Violence continues to be the predominant worldly response to anyone we judge as inferior or undeserving. We do violence to all whom we demonize and dehumanize, and those that we neglect or reject. History has shown that these people range from ethnic or religious groups, to entire nations; from those who simply look different to us; to those who speak a foreign language, or disagree with our ideology. The list goes on. Despite our prejudices, the ignorance and hatred we harbor in our hearts, we have to strive for God's perspective. Have we learned to set aside our judgments, and truly welcome all in faith, as Jesus does? And do we also continue to invite those who do not yet know the love of the Lord to meet Him, as Jesus continues to reach out in love to reconcile all the world to God?

In condemning the wicked tenants, the Judean leaders condemn themselves to God's judgment. They reject God's grace and forgiveness in the person of Jesus Christ. We too reject Jesus every time we refuse to believe in Him, to trust Him, or to accept all who come to Him in faith. We reject Jesus every time we reject a child of God by our judgmentalism, and our acts of injustice. We slither down the belly of the snake, and find ourselves confronted by a face full of humiliation, whenever we try to put conditions on God's love. Or, even when we try to hoard God's good gifts, instead of allowing love to change us, heal us, and deliver us from bondage. The true tenants of God's kingdom offer to God His fruits in deeds of justice and compassion, mercy and loving-kindness. The tenants of God's kingdom simply believe in Christ and trust in Him.

Jesus is audacious in His humility. He bears the fullness of divine authority, yet he never bullies or demands our belief or our trust. He tells us stories so that we can always make up our own minds. He reveals Himself to anyone with ears to hear, and eyes to see. He offers abundant life, not violence. He stands amongst us today and always, inviting us to believe in Him and to trust Him. As Robert Farrar Capon says, Jesus "died for the sins of those who killed him – even for the sins of unbelief by which we kill him all over again." As Jesus tells the man whose son is possessed, "All things can be done for the one who believes." Perhaps our own voices should join with the father of the boy who immediately cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:23-24). The good news of this story is that in the healing of our own unbelief, our faith is strengthened, and we're better equipped to share God's expansive and unconditional love.

Amen.