

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

By Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible, light a candle beside it, and place ripe grapes and a bottle of wine or grape juice at the center.

LEADER: We gather to break open the word of God.

ALL: As the ancient prophets heard a word from God necessary in their time—

LEADER: May we hear a word that is needed in ours.

ALL: May the Holy Spirit empower us to live out this message in our lives.

LEADER: We are God's plantings.

ALL: May we produce good fruit in the vineyard of our world.

Sunday's gospel features a vineyard and reminds us that growing vines and grapes requires digging the ground, clearing rock, planting the vines, pruning, training them. As I drove home across the prairie this spring, I saw a familiar sight—a whole family of eight walking spread apart across a plowed field, picking rocks, and putting them on a flatbed trailer.

My nieces made up a song for rock-picking. One led, "Nobody hates it as much as I do." Everybody answered, "We do." Second line, "Nobody hates it as much as me." "I do," each affirmed with vigor. The work is dusty, heavy, sweaty, and often miserable. But one learns the land close up, step by step, stone by stone, and starts to feel belonging. Earth cares for us, and we care for Earth.

The vineyard workers in Sunday's gospel are tenants. Like them, my family lived on someone else's farm, worked the land, and shared the crops with the owner.

I like to drive past the farm where I grew up. I know the lay of the land like a pro golfer knows a course, the crests of the hills, the sloughs, the unmovable rocks along the fence lines. As I learned the land and worked it with Dad and Grandpa, it seemed to belong to us.

Farmers today often operate in efficient supply chains with processing plants where the Covid-19 thrived in close working conditions. Closed plants left farmers with pigs in their pens, and owners and workers with lost income. We live in relationships.

Few people farm today but many of city people rent and

lease. For someone who owns buildings, an ideal tenant treats the leased space as if it were his or her own. But tenants always cause wear. Apartments need painting and repair. The rent due at the end of every month reminds tenants who the owner is. The end of a lease brings up settling the damage deposit.

On farms, tenants and owner square up at harvest. In Sunday's gospel the owner's servants discover trouble in the vineyard. The tenants feel the entire grape harvest belongs to them.

● What is your experience of being a tenant? Of being an owner who rents to others?



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GOSPEL

Who rejects, who accepts Jesus?

NARRATOR: When the chief priests and elders of the people asked Jesus by whose authority he was teaching in the temple, he spoke to them in parables.

JESUS: Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug out a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and went to another country. When harvest time came, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his share of the grapes. The tenants seized the slaves, beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. The landowner sent other slaves, more than before. The tenants treated them the same way. Finally the landowner sent his son to them.

LANDOWNER: They will respect my son.

JESUS: But when they saw the son, the tenants said to one another—

TENANTS: Here is the heir. Let us kill him; then we will have his inheritance!

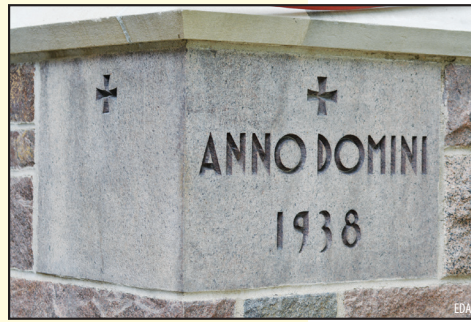
JESUS: With that the tenants seized the son, dragged him outside the vineyard, and killed him. When the Lord of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

CHIEF PRIESTS: He will put that wicked crowd to a miserable death.

ELDERS: And lease his vineyard out to others who will see to it that he has grapes at harvest time.

JESUS: Have you never read in the scriptures: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was God’s doing. It is amazing in our eyes”? For this reason, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will yield a rich harvest.

Matthew 21:33-43



story in allegory. God is the owner of the vineyard. The son, the owner’s heir, is Jesus. The tenants are Jesus’ opponents who succeed in having him

put to death. The owner’s servants are the prophets who have sought to hold king and priests faithful to their relationship with God.

The narrator part in the gospel sets the scene. Jesus’ audience is the temple officials, who challenge his authority for having cleansed the temple. The setting is the temple courtyards. In telling the parable Jesus aims to confront the officials indirectly.

When Jesus asks the chief priests and elders to respond to the parable, their judgment reveals that they think they own the vineyard. “Put the tenants to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to others,” they say. They put themselves in the place of an aggrieved owner who must deal with rebellious tenants.

However, the allegory makes God the owner of the vineyard, and puts the temple leaders in the tenants’ place. The parable calls for a reversal. The officials are the tenants who should change, believe in the owner’s son, and produce a fruitful harvest.

All three synoptic gospels include this parable with its allegory about Jesus and indictment of temple officials. Christians need to remember Jesus is a Jew, trying to reform his religion. He has both opponents and believers among the leaders. Christians today have no reason to blame the Jewish people for Jesus’ death. They are our ancestors in faith.

Entitlement and gratitude struggle in us.

Sunday’s gospel tells at least two stories, maybe three. The first story is about God and the vineyard. It echoes the prophet Isaiah, who compares God’s relationship with the people of Israel to a farmer’s planting and caring for a vineyard. God’s caring has brought the people out of Egypt,

given them the commandments, and helped them settle the land. Isaiah laments in his time that Israel’s leaders neglect the poor and make alliances with kingdoms that worship other gods.

At harvest time a second story emerges about tenants and an owner. It tells Jesus’

● What fruitful harvest do you expect from religious leaders today?

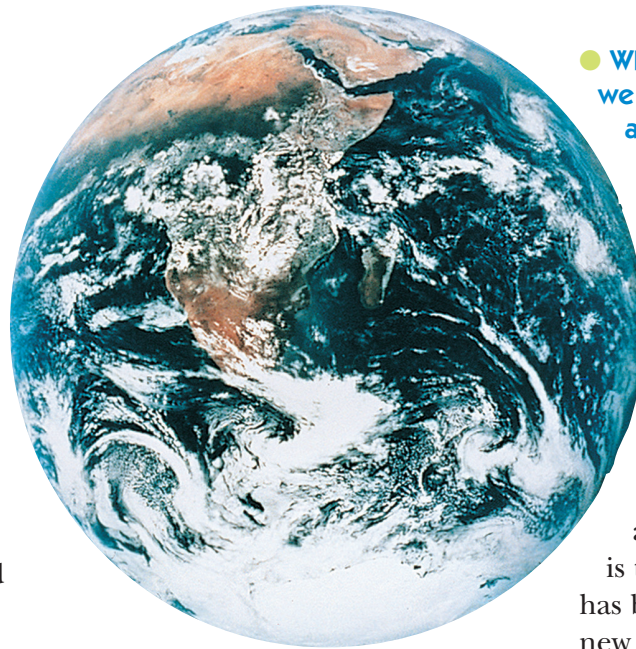
Economically in Jesus' time, 95% of the people were poor peasants who worked hard to survive. Roman soldiers from the occupying army often received land as payment for their military service and kept peasants as tenants to cultivate and tend their vineyards.

Poor, overtaxed peasants might have reason to resent and resist giving a Roman owner a share of the harvest. But the parable has no hint of this political motive. These tenants simply want the whole harvest and the vineyard for themselves.

The chief priests and elders don't identify as tenants whose work is to cultivate and care for the people. They see themselves as entitled owners. As readers, we have already learned in the gospel that Jesus is teaching and caring for people who are poor in the temple, the very place where these leaders should be serving God's people.

● Who needs care in our churches today that we are not seeing and serving?

We humans are all tenants of Earth and like those in the parable, our basest instincts are to draw everything to ourselves. God has given us a precious vineyard/planet/home, teeming with life and extraordinary resources, but we have mistaken God's gifts for our possessions. Our greed has put our precious planet in grave danger. Pope Francis suggests our throw-away society is turning Earth into a garbage dump.



● What can draw us together as we tend and repair our beautiful and fragile Earth?

If there is hope for us, it is Jesus' message writ large across his life and death: whatever happens, love will not leave. Significantly this parable doesn't end with its allegory of Jesus' death. Christian tradition attaches a resurrection image. Jesus is the stone once rejected that has become the cornerstone of a new community.

The gospel is quoting from Psalm 118.22 to interpret who Jesus is. He is God's Son, the inheritor of the vineyard. A homonym, words that sound alike, connects the parable and the quotation. In Hebrew the word for *son* is *ben*, and the word for *stone* is *eben*. Jesus, who was crucified just as the stone was rejected, becomes in his resurrection the cornerstone on which a new community arises.

● What reservoirs of goodness in us can God draw on as together we tend our beautiful and fragile communities of faith?

Pope Francis insistently connects repairing Earth with sustaining people who live in poverty. We can't do one without the other. The common good requires opting to lift up the poor and vulnerable. Concerns for ourselves must lead us to love one another rather than keep ourselves safe from tenants of earth living in poverty and vulnerable to destructive storms and rising sea levels. Wealthy industrial nations like the United States have an obligation to help poorer nations fund new technologies that will stop the carbon emissions (*Laudato Si'* #156-158).

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

- Go to the Catholic Climate Covenant website to join in healing Earth and caring for people who are poor. The website offers practical ways to participate. Catholicclimatecovenant.org
- Read *Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope*, stories about the kids Nicholas Kristof rode the bus with growing up in Yamhill, OR. A quarter of the kids are dead from causes such as drugs, suicide, alcohol, obesity, reckless accidents. Kristof and his wife Sheryl WuDunn call us as Americans to stop blaming people who suffer loss of jobs, health care, dignity, hopes, and children and help them and us as a nation recover.

Isaiah sings God's disappointment.

Song of the Vineyard

Let me sing a love song
about my friend's vineyard:
My friend had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
He dug it, cleared it of stones,
and planted the choicest vines.
Within it he built a watchtower
and hewed out a wine vat.
He expected a harvest of grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.

Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah, judge between
me and my vineyard:
What more was there to do for my
vineyard that I had not done?
I expected it to yield grapes;
why did it yield wild grapes?

I will tell you what I will do
to my vineyard:
I will take down its hedge,
so animals can graze it.
I will break down its wall,
so it will be trampled!
I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed.
It will be overgrown
with briars and thorns.
I will command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

The vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel.
The people of Judah
are God's planting.
God looked for justice
but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness
but heard a cry.

Isaiah 5:1-7

We can hear the rejected
lover and the spurned
parent speak in
Isaiah's words. God looks for
peace; we are prone to violence.
God expects community, justice,

equality, and generous sharing
of resources. We should be a
people in whom the fruits of
the Spirit are abundant—love,
kindness, patience, humility,
forgiveness.

The vineyard has an owner,
who is deeply invested in
its well-being and who can't
keep from singing a song to
the beloved. This is a hidden
blessing. If God did not care,
God could simply walk away; it
wouldn't matter. Easy come,
easy go.

If nothing counts against one,
nothing counts. But actions and
attitudes do count. God does
care, and accountability is part
of any relationship, especially
a covenantal relationship. A
covenant means hanging in
there and reconciling and
beginning again, and again, and
again.

That is why Isaiah's words
belong in the genre of a love
song. It is why in the gospel
more is at stake than a grape
harvest. God is investing in us
as a people just as we invest our
very lifeblood in our children
and partners. These are the
hardest jobs on the planet.
They disappoint but promise
new life.

We can learn faithfulness to
those we love and to all we have
planted from God's faithfulness.
We owe God gratitude and
partnership in our world.

● **Where do you invest despite
disappointment?**

PRAY

LEADER: Let us imagine
our patches of vineyard
and ask ourselves: What
more can I do? What
must I put in God's
hands? *Pause.*

LEADER: Dismiss all
anxiety from your minds.

ALL: *Care for this vine
your right hand has
planted.*

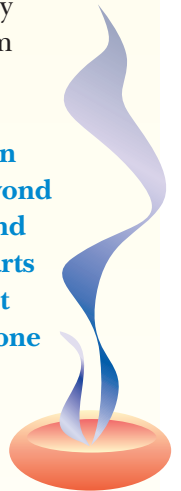
LEADER: Present your
needs to God in every
form of prayer and in
petitions full of gratitude.

*Mention people or concerns
you wish to place in God's
hands.*

LEADER: Let us pray
Paul's blessing from
Sunday's second
reading.

ALL: *May God's own
peace, which is beyond
understanding, stand
guard over our hearts
and minds in Christ
Jesus, the cornerstone
of our community.
Amen.*

*Bless and share the
cup of wine or juice
and grapes.*



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