

Cedar Heights Community Presbyterian Church  
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Ope!  
10/08/2023

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### Old Testament Lesson—Isaiah 5:1-7

*Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And 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 have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!*

### New Testament Lesson—Matthew 21:33-46

*"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 watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 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." 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'? 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. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*

As most of you know, I had the privilege of preaching alongside Pastor Dave last Sunday at Jubilee United Methodist Church in Waterloo. It was a wonderful service and opportunity to worship, fellowship, and break bread with that community. So thank you for making the drive and for the willingness to experience something new last week.

What I didn't expect, though, was for several of you to comment afterwards about how my Southern accent really began to break through during my message. And that's pretty typical for me actually. I don't actively try to suppress my accent; it just happens to come out when I get

really excited or passionate about something. And it *really* comes out when I'm just in that culture—around lots of other Southern folk.

That's when the "y'all's" get thrown around, certain vowels are extended and the drawl begins to peek through. I start substituting "isn't" with "ain't" all the time. And if I'm really feeling it, we Southern folk sometimes stop using certain connecting words in our sentences and just allow context to fill in the gaps.

For example, I wouldn't say, "I'm going to the grocery store." Instead, I would say, "I'm goin' grocery store." "I'll see ya, I'm goin' bank. I 'member when you usedtocould stop at the bank and Piggly Wiggly cuz they'ze in the same building."

But don't you Midwestern folks think you aren't weird, too! Lord, have mercy! Y'all have your own set of Midwestern-isms, idioms, regional expressions and turns of phrase. Y'all got all this unique prairie-talk and farm-speak. Don't deny it.

I remember being taken aback (really downright confused) when I heard some of these Midwestern-isms for the first time. Yeah, there's the basic "pop." No thanks, I'll take a *soda*, though. I'll never forget going to Hy-Vee several years ago and being asked, "Would you like that in a sack?"

I think I probably just stared blankly at the cashier for about thirty seconds before I understood the question. "Oh! You mean a *bag*! Yes, yes I would. Thank you." And to answer the question I can see your eyes asking: "No, I'm not from around here."

But, hands down, the strangest—the most baffling one I've come across yet is that question we all get from our servers—that question which makes no sense. It gets asked a short while after we've received our food in a restaurant. You know it well: "How are those first couple of bites?"

"The first...couple...bites?" "Well, if I'm honest, the first one was really good. The second was even better! But that third one...well it was just awful...really caught me off guard."

And yes: I've definitely fantasized about responding that way whenever I hear that question. But, alas, I try my best to not be a jerk...at least intentionally.

But of course...I cannot leave out the *crème de la crème* of Midwestern, informal communication. And this one I've readily accepted and even find some joy in it. It's short and sweet, fun to say...you can use it in lots of different ways and contexts. So it can mean different things based on how and when it's used.

All that potential in just those three letters that, when put together, create something special, don't they? Ope. Ope!

You see a few common examples of "ope" usage and meaning there on the screen. Ope, sorry about that! Ope, there it is! And my personal favorite: Ope, lemme squeeze past ya!

Seriously, there needs to be like a Midwesterner's translation of the Bible. I mean, wouldn't that be equally awesome and hilarious? Can you imagine all the "opes" there'd be all over the place?

Imagine Cain pretending to be innocent before God: "Ope, where'd Abel go?" Or Mary Magdalene on Easter: "Ope, there's nobody in the tomb!"

Now, unfortunately, those living in Jesus' day didn't have that word in their vocabulary. But if they did, we certainly would've read it here this morning. If they did, we would've seen one of the biggest "ope" moments ever right here in Matthew.

And I imagine it would've been a collective "ope" coming from several people at the same time. Here's that moment again; and it comes right after Jesus tells a rather harsh, no-nonsense kind of parable...

*When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that [Jesus] was speaking about them.*

Some said it and some were probably thinking it: “Ope, he’s talking about us!”

Lord knows Jesus doesn’t do himself any favors here in terms of curbing the violent plans of the religious leaders. They would’ve arrested him on the spot—only reason they don’t is because there were too many people around—too many that would’ve stood in their way.

In his parable, Jesus compares the Pharisees to greedy, power-hungry stewards of a vineyard who will stop at nothing to gain more wealth and influence—who will go so far as to even murder the son of vineyard’s owner. And (by the way) that’s after killing two sets of slaves—slaves (with no power)—who were sent just to collect the crops that were grown—standard procedure in those days.

Time and time again, it’s been religious figures like these (the leaders of the day) who have seized and killed the prophets sent by God—prophets sent to redirect God’s people and call them to repentance. And more often than not, they’ve killed those prophets for calling out their greed and hypocrisy.

Like those prophets of old, Jesus is doing the same thing here. He’s exposing the Pharisees, the priests, and the scribes—exposing their idolatry—exposing their love of power and their love of money.

These religious leaders, after all, should’ve been first in line to follow Jesus! These supposedly faithful and educated ones were surely aware of their own history—a history of ignoring, exiling, and executing those God sends to lead them back to righteousness. Surely, they know an authentic prophet when they see it!

But here’s the thing...In order to accept Jesus as a true prophet, they would first have to give up their death-grip on power and status. In order to acknowledge Jesus as authentically from God, they would have to give up their privilege and instead follow some peasant from Nazareth—a carpenter’s son from po-dunk Galilee. They would have to confess, as Christ says: *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*

Most of all, they’d have no choice but to admit that Jesus’ criticisms of their actions and the systems that support them are true! They’d have to admit their own culpability and complicity in the world’s injustice.

I get it, friends. I get it how parables with this much violence can make us uncomfortable. So let me remind you: Parables are fictional.

But the ravenous desire for power and money at the expense of the “least of these”—the minimizing of corrupt practices and systems—well, that *was* and *is* all too real and Jesus is calling it out publicly for all to hear—especially privileged religious folks like you and me.

Jesus’ words are harsh, yes. But they’re harsh for good reason. Because Christ the prophet knows the consequences when those in power abuse their power.

He knows what can happen when those who’ve been corrupted refuse to face and acknowledge the harms they’ve inflicted. He’s personally witnessed what an insatiable lust for influence and wealth does to the most vulnerable of society.

That lust reproduces and perpetuates cycles of oppression. It dehumanizes those who are different. It scapegoats the poor and the desperate and the alien. It blames those who have nothing for their own misfortune and strips them of any lingering shreds of dignity.

Jesus’ words are hard to hear, yes. But his silence would be worse, deafening—even cruel. His silence would itself be a form of violence.

So make no mistake: this prophet will not be silenced; not even the grave could do that. This prophet—our Prince of Peace—will not ever hold his tongue when power is being abused (especially in the name of God). He cannot sit idly by watching the greed in our hearts metastasize in shameful ways.

After all: Poverty should not exist in the richest country in the world. But it does.

Hunger should not exist where there are dozens of multi-billionaires. But it does.

So this prophet's gonna keep speaking up until we, the stewards of God's Creation, start taking our mission seriously. He's gonna keep speaking out until we, the tenants of God's holy vineyard, start bearing the fruit we know is possible and, more importantly, that Christ knows is possible.

Siblings in Christ: Speaking truth to power was part and parcel of Jesus' ministry and it's no different for his disciples today. We *should* do the same and we *can* do the same. That's the good news of the gospel!

Now, perhaps you've just realized, "Ope, it's time to start bearing fruit!"

You better believe it is.

So start today. This vineyard ain't so big when we work together.

Amen.