



**GOD'S VINEYARD
NEEDS ATTENTION**

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*(Ordinary Time/
Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost)*



NEW HOPE

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**Lectionary Texts: Exodus 17:1-7;
Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32**

Exodus 17:1-7

¹From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Philippians 2:1-13

¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Matthew 21:23-32

²³When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'" ²⁶But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John

as a prophet.”²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’²⁹ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

The Message: God’s Vineyard Needs Attention

Before I get to the Gospel lesson I’d like to share a short reading from Ephesians...one a lot of us like...especially when we take our favorite verses out of context. Ephesians 2: 8 and 9 says...and I’m sure many of you know the verses by heart...⁸“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” We love these verses, we quote them, and dare I say misrepresent them as a way to minimize the importance of works. But I say this morning, that we stop reading too soon. Verse 10 says, “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”...we are made for works, prepared for works, and equipped for works as a response to grace. Now I would ask you to think about this while I shift to talking about the Gospel lesson.

On the surface this scripture is not hard to interpret...after all Jesus would later compare the Pharisees to cups that look pretty and clean and shiny on the outside, but inside, the cups are dirty, moldy, and corroded. That’s how it was with the Pharisees: they looked good on the outside, when people were watching, but inside, their hearts were polluted and corrupted and stained. So Jesus and the Pharisees were locked in conflict that morning even as he arrived in the temple. But we need to remember that in talking to the Pharisees, Jesus was talking to the church and in talking to the church, he is talking to us!

The Pharisees confronted Jesus and his authority, and he answered with a story: There was a man who had two sons. He said to the first son, “Will you go and work in the vineyard today? The vineyard is a mess, and there is so much work to be done: Picking up the rocks, planting, pruning, picking grapes, producing wine. Will you do the work in the vineyard today?” Remember that stories are allegories. What Jesus was saying to them...is saying to us...is will you care for the sick and dying, the blind and the lame, the deaf and the dumb? Will you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison? Will you reach out in mission to those who need help where you live and across the world?”...Now back to the story...the second one asked said, “Of course, you can count on me.”...Allow me to take a little liberty here in the telling so we might recognize ourselves a bit more clearly. Like us, off he went in the general

direction of the vineyard...his intentions were good. When he arrived he conducted a worship service, held a Bible study, and then enjoyed a fellowship meal with his friends who also had come to the vineyard. All good things!

But, of course, the vineyard was still a mess and there was much work and none of it was done; just like our world is still a mess and there is still work to do. After a little time the first son decided to go do the real work after all...And Jesus looked the Pharisees in the eyes and asked the penetrating question: "*And which of the two sons was faithful to the father's will?*" And the answer was so obvious. Jesus continued: "*And so the tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God before you Pharisees, even though you look so religious and smell so religious.*"...Now that is a zinger, isn't it? But what does this story have to do with you and me?

This parable is an invitation from Christ to go and do God's work in the vineyard, in the messed up world in which we live. And living like a Christian really is work in this messed up world. There are so many hurting people to care for, so many sick and dying, blind and lame, deaf and dumb, so many without food, clothing and in prison. There is so much hurricane damage, and so many people in Africa with too little food and too much disease. Yes, it is hard work to live as a Christian in this kind of world.

Just last week I attended a mission board meeting for the North Carolina Conference of the UMC...I heard just how devastating hurricane Irene was to some areas of the Outer Banks. Only a handful of homes in Wanchese did not receive flood damage, and these relatively poor fishermen cannot afford flood insurance. The UMC Churches on the Rodanthe charge suffered incredible damage. Some areas were still without power and still not letting visitors in---even work teams are still restricted. And there is a desperate need for volunteer help both now and into the future. See me after church if you think you can help.

I also heard of the plight of Africans in Sudan who are literally starving to death, of Liberians in need of a hand up to farm more efficiently, of people who need help getting wells and latrines so they have access to safe drinking water. And I heard of many other needs throughout the world. It is safe to say that the vineyard, the world, is still in a mess. There are always disasters...there are always wars...there are always divorces and families falling apart...there are always poor families living down the street, with not enough money and emotional resources to make it...and there is a huge need overseas.

And what is the reaction of the church to this pain and devastation in the world around us, far and near? Too often, we merely hold our worship services in the middle of the vineyard. We have our Bible studies and small group studies in the middle of the vineyard. We have fellowship meals and talk about how sad it is that others are suffering.

And so, who could blame God as we think about the parable for today, if in His disgust for our unwillingness to do the needed work in the vineyard said, "I will go and find somebody else who will do

the work in this world of mine.” This parable is an invitation for us *not* to be like the Pharisees. It is a challenge to go into God’s messed up world and do the necessary work.

And so in this parable for today, Jesus is inviting you and me to have a change of heart...you and I need a change of heart...about the messed up world around us. Instead of seeking to isolate ourselves and protect the church from the disagreeableness of the world, you and I need a change of heart about the needs of hurting people around us...we need a change of heart about actually doing God’s work of love in a messed up world. Instead of ignoring or hiding from the polluted stream that is the world around us, we need to jump into the water and make a difference! We need a change of heart...a change inside. We need to serve in order to grow.

It is true that each of us may be called to do something a little different...That is a good thing...but it is equally true that each of us is called to do something. Help feed the hungry and teach them to be self-sufficient...help clean mud out of a flooded house...visit the sick...support the work of a missionary (perhaps even speak out for your church to create a covenant relationship with one)...support a project that fights Malaria...support wells and latrines for African communities...visit the prisons...and if you are not physically able to do these things yourself you may be called to support one of these things with whatever monetary means that God has given you. The point is that the world is a mess and God wants us to help clean it up.

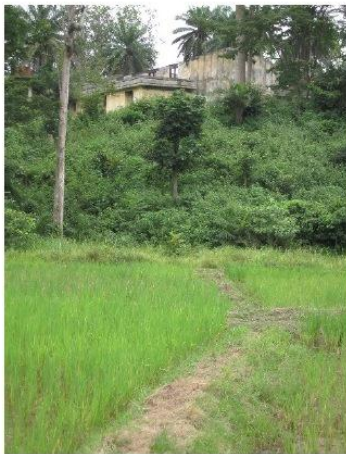
I invite you now, to look at the following which shows just a little of the messiness of the vineyard and some of the ways you may feel called to help.

God's Vineyard Needs Attention

Where is God calling us beyond our back yard?

God is calling us to work in the vineyard! Perhaps it is in one of these ways:

To Improve Farming and Fight Hunger in Africa?



To support wells and Latrines for Community Health?



To Covenant with a Missionary?

Mozart Adevu



Trained by Mozart, this farmer now trains others in bee keeping in Liberia -- a mark of relational sustainability.



Moringa Tree



A bit closer to home: Storm Relief



To Help With Hurricane Relief

- Advance # S-00176/ or simply memo your check for storm relief
- Give a day to help with clean-up or rebuild:
disasterresponse@nccumc.org or call
888-440-9167 to arrange a time

God's vineyard is a mess

Where is God seeking our help?



One thing is certain. God's Vineyard is a mess, and we are called to help him however we can.

Yes Jesus told a parable about two sons...and I am always amazed at Jesus' stories. They are so brilliant, so perceptive, so on the money. Jesus' stories reveal the very mind and heart of God. In this simple story, the father said to one son, "Would you go and work in my vineyard today?" and the son said, "Yes, yes" but didn't do it. But the father said to the other son, "Will you go and work in my vineyard today?" and the second son said "No, I've got other things going on today," but he had a change of heart and went and did what the father requested. Now, which of the two did the will of the father? And the answer was *and still is* so obvious. Can you hear God speaking this morning? "My Daughter...My Son...will you go and work in my vineyard?"

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

Amen!