

Proper 22 Year A: 7/8 October 2017

St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

The Rev. Gary Cyr, Rector

Let us recall our role as stewards
so that we might bear fruits of faithfulness

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

*"Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved."* Ps. 80.7

Born and raised in an agrarian part of Northern Maine, autumn, for me, is that time of the year when fields are harvested: potatoes, broccoli, and a variety of grains are collected and stored for future use. It is a time of thanksgiving and abundance; a time to celebrate hard work and the investment of time and resources into the land so as to have food for the coming seasons. This cycle of life is now lost on many people in our North American consumerist society where we can get any kind of produce year-round. That was not reality for my family as I was growing up. Whether gleaning from the farm land after harvest, or picking produce from the family garden, being raised in Northern Maine meant eating with the seasons, where autumn was that time of the year one prepared for winter. Canning jars and freezer bags were a staple in my mom's kitchen once the fall harvest had been picked. These are fond memories that I reflect upon as the air begins to chill and the leaves start to drop from the trees.

Today's reading from Isaiah, though not mentioning canning jars or freezer bags, does speak of harvest-time, of land that has been cleared and cultivated as a vineyard. It reads as poetic allegory where God is the gardener who envisions a fruitful harvest of sweet grapes; not a failed harvest of wild or rotten grapes that have little use or value. It is a love poem to God's beloved, Israel, who has been blessed by God in numerous ways and who were meant to be a blessing to the nations. Regardless of God's efforts or desire, the people rebelled, and faithlessness bore rotten fruit.

Matthew continues this theme in the words Jesus speaks in the parable of the landowner and the tenants. In his absence, the landowner – or master – entrusts the vineyard to the care of the tenants who are acting as stewards for the master. They are to tend and nurture the vineyard, not as their own

possession, but as caretakers. Greed, however, sets in and they, the tenants, will not give to the master what is his by right of being the landowner. They are thinking that if they have to share the bounty, there will be less for them. After all, it is through their hard work, not the master's, that the vineyard produces a harvest. How shortsighted of them. When faced with fruitful abundance, the people resort to a stance of scarcity.

Here, we hit the limits of allegory. It is easy to see that Isaiah is speaking to Israel, and Jesus is speaking about the Jewish leadership and by extension us – you and I. Such judgement is deserved, but it falters in light of the backstory. It is what precedes the harvest that we must turn to since one cannot have a harvest without first having a planting.

The sowing of a vineyard or garden begins long before any seeds are planted in the soil. Weather conditions, temperature zones, and other environmental concerns need consideration, as do topographical and nutrient levels. Then comes the layout and design of the garden, whether a hectare of land or a small plot behind one's home. Seed purchase and plant variety must align with all of these factors. Then comes the tender cultivation of soil and seedling that is an investment of hope as well as science. God is the master gardener and we are the stewards.

The recent Season of Creation was an intentional effort to awaken us to our proper role as stewards of the land and its resources. Humanity needs this reawakening since we suffer from collective amnesia. We need constant reminding that God is the master, not us. We are stewards. That is what Isaiah and Jesus are doing: reminding us that God is the Author of Life, the Source of Abundance, the Master Gardener who tenderly cultivates and nurtures us so that we might bear the fruit of faithfulness.

Our Jewish sisters and brothers capture this understanding of God well whenever they utter the blessing: *Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha`olam. Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe.* A simple prayer of thanksgiving that honors and acknowledges God as master and ruler of all that is created. The prayers over the gifts that we will soon be hearing is based upon this very prayer of blessing. It is but another means of awakening us to God as the Source of Abundance from whom all blessings flow. As the Master Gardener, it is God who sows the seed, tends the ground in which it is planted, who envisions the desired harvest. It is God who has invested in a garden yet to grow.

The seeds of God's grace are planted in each of us, who come together as a church to bear witness to God's love. It is God's desire and mission to restore all things, to renew all creation to be in

right-relation with God. This mission has a church which encompasses all of us. We are the church and, as such, entrusted with participating in God's mission of restoration and justice. That is our ministry and what we need to plan, organize, and nurture through faithfulness to God's desire and hope.

The church is an instrument of God's love in the world. We are not its owner nor its master. You and I are stewards of the church such that we too, must plan and envision the continued planting of God's grace in the world around us. That is our ministry, and what requires a commitment of resources, both our financial and personal time.

Over the next few weeks, we will be hearing from the Stewardship Working-group on how our varied ministries here at St. James align with the Marks of Mission. During this season of autumn, reflecting on how our ministry here at St. James corresponds to our Baptismal promise as reflected in the Marks of Mission will enable us to celebrate our hard work and witness the fruits of our investment of time and financial resources. It will also allow us to plan a future garden; to map out our common ministry together for the coming year in the life of the church. Throughout the coming weeks, our shared work of reflection will help the Finance Committee and Vestry plan and design our spiritual garden. You will be asked to prayerfully consider your personal commitment to our shared ministry so this planning for the coming planting can begin and faithfully reflect our discipleship.

St. Paul writes in today's epistle: *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ."* (Phil 3.10; 12-14) The call of God in Christ is to be *"a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."* (Mt 21.43) As the Master Gardener, God has planted the seeds of grace in our lives and gifted us with reason and a variety of skills. Being a community of faith that shares in God's mission through our common ministry, we offer to God in thanksgiving for the abundance of blessings we all experience. Let us, therefore, awaken from a collective amnesia, recall our role as stewards of the land and its resources so that we might bear fruits of faithfulness. The harvest is upon us. Let us celebrate the good work of our faith community as we plan for a future planting.