

Lectionary 27 (A)
October 8, 2023
Text: Matthew 21:33-46

Pastor Aaron J. Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon

About a month ago, it was a beautiful late-summer day, and Melinda and I decided to go for a walk along the Willamette River. We started at Willamette Park and followed the path north. As we passed the boat launch area, we saw signs posted warning everyone to not go swimming, or let their pets go swimming, because there was a toxic algae bloom in the river. I thought about how fortunate it was to have that warning posted, because without it, how would anyone know that the water was dangerous. It was warm and sunny out, and the water looked cool and inviting. I wondered how often in the past people or animals had gotten sick because there was no warning about toxic conditions.

Our gospel reading for today offers a warning about toxic conditions. Jesus told a parable to help his listeners recognize something truly dangerous in Israel's life together. It might seem that the priestly authorities were venerated elders who oversaw the worship of God's people in the temple. In the imagery of the parable, they would be honorable tenants who cared faithfully for God's vineyard. But Jesus wanted his listeners to recognize that was not the case. The priestly elites were greedy usurpers who had commandeered the worship of God's people for their own benefit. At every turn, they exploited the common people to enrich themselves, adding a temple tax on top of the already-burdensome Roman taxes. There was also a whole system in place to take more money from the people at every turn when they came to worship at the temple. And when people couldn't pay, the priestly elites seized their land, building massive estates for themselves and forcing the poor to beg or work as day laborers. Israel was supposed to be God's alternative community that was grounded in justice and compassion, and where everyone had enough, but the religious authorities were using the temple as a tool for milking the people dry. And it was absolutely toxic.

By showing us what a real toxic mess looks like, I wonder if the story also invites us to wonder what trustworthy, honorable tenants might look like, ones who recognize that they are working someone else's land, and who then faithfully bring the fruits of the vineyard to the owner. In the case of the ruling elites in Jerusalem, the temple didn't belong to them. Their duty was to care for the worship life of the people so they could present to God a healthy covenant community, one that really did live according to God's vision for the human family, a people grounded in justice and compassion, and where everyone was valued and everyone had enough.

Although Jesus focused his words on the faithless ruling elites in Jerusalem and how they exploited the common people, it seems to me that this parable is just begging to be applied to other situations where people abuse their power and act only for their own benefit, betraying the trust placed in them to act for the wellbeing of all. We're currently in the middle of a toxic political crisis in the House of Representatives. Multnomah County and the City of Portland are in the middle of a toxic leadership crisis for homelessness, mental illness and addiction. The human family is in the middle of a toxic climate crisis, with entrenched economic powers

dragging their feet on making much-needed change. And with every one of these contemporary toxic crises, I find the perspective offered by Jesus' parable to be profoundly clarifying. God has given every one of us gifts of body, mind and spirit, and has entrusted us with the care of God's world, the care of our common life, the care of neighborly relations. We don't own any of these things, and they're not just for us. We are workers in God's vineyard, and we are responsible to work for God's purposes of compassion and healing and reconciliation so that God's gifts can be a blessing for all.

It's hard to come away from Jesus' parable without a sense for what a mess things are, both then and now. And when Jesus asked the temple authorities what they would do with a mess like this, what they would do with greedy tenants like this, their response was incredibly, and predictably, harsh. Put those wretches to a miserable death! Fortunately, that isn't Jesus' answer, and Jesus' answer is where I find something hopeful and something beautiful in this story. Jesus quotes from the Psalms: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." Jesus knew the religious authorities would reject him and his vision for the human family made whole, but he also trusted that God was at work through him to build a new home for the human family, a home where there is justice and compassion, and everyone has enough. Jesus saw himself as the cornerstone who defines the character of this new building, this new home for the human family.

It might be normal for many people to act like the religious authorities—to be all about self-interest, and to act with violence whenever that self-interest is in any way challenged or threatened, and to turn a blind eye to the needs and hurts of others. It's what makes the human family, in so many ways, a toxic mess. But God has not given up on us, and God has not given up on building a new home for wayward humanity, a home where there is a place for everyone, and where community is defined by compassion and forgiveness, by generosity and humility. That's what God is at work to accomplish through you, through us, through this community we share and through our way of following Jesus. He is the cornerstone. He defines the shape of our life together, the shape of this new home for the human family.

Of course, we don't always get it right. Sometimes the church itself is a toxic mess. But that's why it's so important, so essential, that Jesus is the cornerstone. Jesus is all about forgiveness and a second chance for all of God's beloved creation. Jesus is all about reconciliation and making whole what has been broken. Jesus is all about the power of love giving life and blessing and healing for everyone wounded by humanity's toxic self-concern.

People of God, can you hear the amazing promise of God? In Jesus, God has laid the cornerstone for a new home for us and for the whole human family. In this new home, there will be justice, there will be compassion and a safe place for all. In this new home, relationships that have been damaged are restored, those who have been lost are found and welcomed into God's eternal embrace. In this new home, there is healing for everyone who has been poisoned by the toxic culture around us. In this new home, there is a place for you—now and forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.