

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost/October 8, 2017

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Today we begin our fall theme of stewardship with a tip of the hat to our Jewish roots. The first Christians of course were Jews. One of Israel's three great annual festivals was the Feast of Booths. We see it described in the Book of Deuteronomy (16: 13-17). It was celebrated with great joy and is taking place now among Jews over seven days. Some Christians in Jerusalem also celebrate the Feast. Isaiah may have sung his Song of the Vineyard at the Feast of Booths. "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard." The festival recalls Israel's wilderness pilgrimage. Every pilgrim in Jerusalem had to collect twigs of willow. Each morning of the festival there was a water ceremony. Booths were created with woven branches. Meals were eaten within the booths. Guests were invited and hospitality shown.

"My beloved had a vineyard," Isaiah sings. He's talking about the people of God. He has placed them in a fertile setting, productive, creative, nourishing, beautiful. God has cleared away obstacles as a vintner might clear away stones. We are the choicest of God's creatures, and God watches over us. God sent the prophets, says the Gospel of Matthew, to reveal God's word and will. God shows patience. God created helpers as partners, says the Book of Genesis.

Fred Rogers, known to children as Mr. Rogers, describes the role of helpers in the face of such tragedy as we have seen this week. "(A)n endless succession of real-life disaster, tragedy, and violence... comes to us through news and documentaries. When I was a child," he goes on, "and my mother and I would read about such events in the newspapers or see them in newsreels, she used to tell me, 'Always look for the helpers. There's always someone who is trying to help.' I did, and doing so changed the way I saw

(disasters). I began to see the world was full of doctors and nurses, volunteers, neighbors, and friends who jumped in to help when things went wrong. That was reassuring,” he concluded. We certainly have seen that this week. So God has given us everything we need to be creative and to flourish.

But something has gone wrong. Like a vintner with a well tended vineyard, God expected his people to prosper. He expected his vineyard to yield grapes. But the grapes were sour, wild, and unusable. At the end of Isaiah’s song there is a play on words. God expected justice (the Hebrew word is *Mispat*) but saw *Mispah* or bloodshed. That is our predicament.

But how did we get here? For Paul, it is a misplaced confidence. We glory in our own self-made goodness, in our willfulness, in our capacity to achieve success on our own. Paul says I can play that game, probably better than most. And he lists his credentials. He is part of the in-group; not only that, he is in the most exclusive group. He has the correct background. He is rigorous in doing all the right things. He is zealous and blameless.

Well, what’s wrong with that? Paul is describing the self-made man. This is full of resonance for us here in the United States. It is part of our social DNA. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Alexis de Tocqueville observed, “The citizen of the United States is taught from infancy to rely upon his own exertions, in order to resist the evils and the difficulties of life.” Learning this we distance ourselves from others, and to one degree or another become blind to the helpers. We also become blind to what we owe others. In Matthew’s version of the vineyard story, the tenants decide to keep the land and the produce for themselves. They are blind or unwilling to see that the owner of the vineyard deserves his share. Their refusal turns violent. If we can be anything we want on our own, if we can have anything we want by taking it, well then, who needs God?

Of course, it does not take much to burst this bubble. Paul says that all his attempts at self-sufficiency are only so much rubbish. That strikes our American ears as harsh. But he realizes how easy it is for us to be pushed beyond our limits where only faith and hope have any currency. He concludes it is not about being self-made, but about being made Christ’s own. Paul is equally aware of how easy it is to be blind to what we owe others, not least to

what we owe God. We wall off what we claim is “mine” but behind the wall it all gets rather empty. Meaning happens when we recognize all to whom we are beholden.

We begin to see how cherished we are. We are amazed at all that we have been given in this life – beauty, guidance, the opportunity to be creative, to grow. We have been given such an abundant world through no effort of our own. Paul calls it grace. God gives us helpers. And when we are beyond help God gives us a cornerstone in Christ to lean on.

And what does God require? Perhaps the Prophet Micah said it best – “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6: 8). That seems to me the point of the vineyard stories, the Festival of Booths, and our stewardship. We are made Christ’s own and we follow Christ’s path to give of ourselves in love for the life of others.

Stewardship is relational abundance. There is nothing self-made about it. Self-sufficiency keeps what it has and is tentative about sharing. The mindset is scarcity. When we are relational we see the connections between God, our neighbors, and ourselves. We grow, we serve, and we share. And because of that there is an abundance. We are not just self-made. We are made Christ’s *own*. That is the lesson of the willow, the water, and communion.

The willow branch is part of that abundant world where growing things bring praise and beauty, even healing. The willow is a sign of what it is to grow in faith. It is not self-made, nor are we. We learn from one another. Our prayer is energized by our common worship. Vocal harmony needs more than one person. We are not a single vine but a vineyard. We are intertwined. What we give helps us all to grow in faith. Stewardship is giving to grow in faith.

Nothing grows without water. You can’t have a vineyard without it. Jesus poured himself out for the life of others. He quotes Scripture, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” If water does not flow outward it becomes stagnant like the Dead Sea. That sea receives water from the Jordan River then keeps it. Nothing flows out. Consequently we say it is dead. In contrast, our lives must overflow in service for others. The way of Jesus is to give of ourselves in love for the life of others. And in fact that is

what keeps us ourselves alive. Always look for the helpers. Stewardship is giving. It is life-giving for all.

Hospitality is at the heart of communion. The poet George Herbert describes the Eucharistic meal as one in which we draw back, afraid that we have more to do with bloodshed than justice. But God who is love makes a place for us. We demure all too conscious of our shame. But God replies, and know you not who bore the blame? We make room for Christ who prepares a place for us. Or as the prayer goes, Christ dwells in us and we in him. Giving empties out space, clears out all the fears and preoccupations, so that there is occupancy in which Christ can find a room.

That is the lesson of the willow, the water, and communion. It is the Song of the Vineyard at the Festival of Booths, and the meaning of all the relational, intertwining abundance that we call stewardship.

*Amen.*