

Practicing Resurrection In God's Vineyard: Call To A Conversion/Spirit Of Liberation In Our Midst – Mikey Ward

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Originally, I intended to begin my time with you today by commemorating how on this day in 451 CE the Council of Chalcedon began. Specifically, I desired to discuss how Cyril of Alexandria's notion of Christ's "two natures" is the most infamous of a long list of decisions made by a church that "was no longer a small community of fervent believers", but rather, "a large and unruly institution very much immersed in the world."¹ Moreover, I desired to tell a story about the game of baseball and how today's Scripture passages presented one with a "soft toss" (as if there is such a thing).

And yet, early Monday morning—around 4am—my wife Sarah awoke to her CNN app and soon woke me to tell me that something **big** had just happened. "It happened again," she said, "there was another mass-shooting!" Where I expected a soft toss, life had thrown a curveball. Now as someone whose job has made him apt at waking on a moment's notice to attend to the most recent emergency on campus, I was quickly wide awake. After my heart rate lowered and the adrenaline wore off we learned that at the time over 40 were reported to be dead and over 200 injured at the hands of 64-year-old white domestic terrorist. Later that morning I asked many I came in contact with if they had heard the news or if they had family in Vegas at the time of the attack. As death toll and casualty numbers increased throughout the day, I, like probably many of you, stopped to reflect for a moment, shake my head, and pray, "Lord, in your mercy." However, by Thursday, and in the midst of the crux of writing and editing, I realized how numb I already was to the terror that froze me not 72 hours prior. What a shame. Lord, in your mercy.

For the time being, what transpired in Vegas will be known as the most devastating mass-shooting in **modern American history**. Yet, in a nation whose roots are embedded in a more devastating foundation of mass-shootings of indigenous people, ought we not be surprised by the events that transpired Monday night? Appalled? Absolutely. Provoked to do and be what Wendell Berry calls "practicing resurrection" in his poem *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer's Liberation Front?*" I sure hope so. Fifty-eight people were killed and 527 people were injured. I do not want to dismiss this atrocity. However, this is not new. There is a pattern of injustice all around us. This pattern is a life-choking vine, comparable to the kudzu plant that is quickly choking out vegetation in the southern half of this nation. It is so intertwined in our culture. As Christians in 2017 Midwest America, we ought not turn a blind eye and ear when Isaiah cries out that God *expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry* of the oppressed!

Last week, our dear friend John spoke to us about his beautiful son Mateo—the "El Nino Supremo." He elaborated the distinct difference between power and authority, and drew out how we easily confuse the example of Jesus Christ in our midst. Today's Scriptural passages give us, the Body of Christ, an indication of God's incomprehensible and steadfast love. Woven together, today's passages explicitly tell a simple tale of God and his vineyard. Specifically, in Isaiah, the Psalter, and the Gospel reading we see how God remains faithfully in personal relationship with his people, despite the people's failure to reciprocate.

¹ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 201.

Originally intended to indicate the people of Israel as the beloved people of God, the vineyard indicates how and through whom we—participants originally outside the fruits of God’s vineyard—have been graciously grafted into the Body of Christ. However, this tale of God and his vineyard is signposted with continual prophetic warnings. In our Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah destruction is threatened to the vineyard by means of the Assyrian army. And at the apex of today’s gospel reading Jesus exclaims to the elders and chief priests in the temple, *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.* Where ought we as a small, predominantly white, middle-class congregation in Greenville, Illinois, locate ourselves within this exclamation?

Today, I seek to be like one in a vineyard, and partake in the shaking and pruning of a conversion process that I believe is already taking place among us. May we be people who do away with a collective past that reflects the white supremacy of prominent 20th century white theologians more than Paul’s cruciform posture when he states: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.* May we be people who work tirelessly to produce the harvest of ultimate jubilation. However, in order to do so, let us turn to the three explicit uses of the vineyard in today’s readings.

The first comes to us from the prophet Isaiah. Now my research tells me that the usage of the imagery of vine, vineyard, and grape is a rare, but powerful one in ancient Israel. It is a significant source of sustenance, significance, and source of the festive drink used during times of jubilation. Today we find the prophet Isaiah in the midst of one such festivals of jubilation. **Sukkoth**, the festival of booths, is one of three harvest festivals that recalls the wilderness wandering of the Hebrew people as well as the grape harvest. Not coincidentally, we are in the midst of **Sukkoth** right now. Beginning last Wednesday, the festival of booths will continue until this Wednesday, October 11. Scholars believe that it was here at this prolonged celebration that Isaiah rose to sing the song in which our Old Testament reading is found.

Known as the “Song of the Vineyard,” this passage denotes an intimacy between Isaiah and his beloved friend. In fact, several commentaries likened Isaiah to a “best man” at a wedding speaking on behalf of his best friend. This is to say that Isaiah is essentially giving a best man speech. Like any good best men or maids of honor Isaiah leads his listener step by step to an understanding of the meaning this parable with great artistic power. The structure of the song is clearly subdivided: it consists of a brief introduction (v 1), the song parable in three stanzas (1b-2; 3-4; 5-6), and the interpretation of its parable in v. 7.² Some scholars point out that the structure of this song follows that of a speech of accusation. However, as stated above, Isaiah is supposed to add to the general rejoicing and merriment of the occasion, not take a tone of accusation. Needless to say, what is he doing? Can you imagine the cringe moment that ensued when he ends his song of his beloved with what we would call a “mic drop” moment? The prophet plays on the similarity in sound between the Hebrew words for *justice* (*mishpat*) and *bloodshed* (*mispach*), *righteousness* (*tsedaqah*) and *cry* (*tse’aqah*), the cry of the oppressed.³ In a time of jubilation Isaiah has indicted the kings and the people of Judah and foretold their destruction.

² Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), 59.

³ NRSV, 921.

There had to be an unwritten rule that there are topics considered inappropriate or “don’t go there”-worthy when celebrating the harvest festival. Sure, in our society’s wedding speeches you can make fun of the bridegroom. Sure, you can tell an embarrassing or revealing story. But, surely you ought not do what the prophet Isaiah does here. What Isaiah does would be comparable to that of a best man or maid of honor today proclaiming that the wedding all were gathered to celebrate was already destined for divorce. Now I’m guessing we all have that one wedding that comes to mind when we think of especially cringe-worthy speeches. However, I am guessing no one here has heard a best man or maid of honor speech where one prophesies divorce. And yet, this is essentially what Isaiah proclaims when he prophesies an attack by the Assyrian army against Jerusalem. According to Isaiah, “the only way the disaster might be averted was for the people of Judah to put aside its sinful and rebellious ways, and to try once more to do God’s will as the chosen people of God.”⁴ However, as we have read today, there is very little hope conveyed for such a conversion.

This level of despair is demonstrated by the repetitive use of the verb *expect* in verses 2, 4, and 7. Derived from the Hebrew word *kavah*, this verb expresses the disappointment of Yahweh caused by the unthankfulness of his people. When we read the passage, we see that Yahweh was right in expecting something. Yahweh has deliberately picked the ideal piece of land, cleared it of stones, has planted the ultimate seeds, built a watchtower, and built a wine vat. Nothing has been left undone to create a “congenial climate for a harvest.”⁵

Specifically, “the watchtower in the vineyard, the hedge, and stone wall surrounding it surely indicate the way Yahweh provided help against the enemies who wanted to trample Yahweh’s inheritance.”⁶ More generally, in v. 6 we see that Yahweh was Lord over the natural processes that provided rain for their land in due season. Obviously, the vineyard demonstrates Yahweh’s deliberate goodness towards the house of Israel as well as what Yahweh is really like. Simultaneously, it provides clear insight into what Israel’s relationship with God was like. They were unthankful and, as such, they as the vine are the only conceivable cause for the wild fruit unfit for wine. It is apparent why Yahweh was justified in his disappointment. Yahweh had labored greatly, and so too suffered greatly in disappointment. Thus, his wrath was certainly understandable when Isaiah states that God is going to *remove* the *hedge* or city wall, and that *it shall be devoured. God will break down its wall and it shall be trampled down. God will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns.* In fact, God will even *command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.* Therefore, although unimaginable to us, Isaiah is not to be thought of as too audacious in today’s readings, but rather as an example to follow and build upon.

The second use of the vineyard imagery appears in today’s Psalter excerpt from Psalm 80. The psalmist very likely had in mind Judah’s experience of defeat and exile in the early sixth century B.C. when he describes Israel’s origin as God’s people in terms of a vine. When the psalmist does so, he is commenting on the trampled condition of God’s vine and asks God to once more

⁴ Daniel J. Harrington, *God’s Vineyard*. (America: The Jesuit Review: Print, 2008).

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew in Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. ed. By G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 72.

⁶ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 186.

care for and protect his beloved vine. Although Isaiah's warning had been fulfilled, the vine remained the object of God's care. Again, this is an indication of the character of God.

Lastly, the third and most crucial use of the vineyard imagery in today's readings comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew. Last week's Gospel reading was the first third of an episode where Jesus uses three parables to answer under whose authority he is acting in his ministry. As if the parable of the two sons were not enough for the chief priests and the elders present in the temple, Jesus tells them a second and a third in succession. Today's reading is the second parable of three: the parable of the wicked tenants.

Here we see Christ simultaneously taking up the Song of the beloved Vineyard in Isaiah and the cry of the psalmist in verses 14 and 15 when it states: *Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted.* In fact, the introduction of Jesus's story is remarkably similar to the account in Isaiah. The parable begins by alluding to Isaiah 5 and the extraordinary care God provides for his vineyard. However, when we read the parable it becomes clear that "the landowner is God, the vineyard is Israel as God's special people, the tenants are the political and religious leaders of Israel, the harvest is the fullness of God's kingdom and the judgement that will accompany it, the servants sent to collect the landowners produce are the prophets, and the landowner's son is Jesus."⁷ In like manner to Isaiah, Jesus is passing judgment on the Israel of his day and its leaders. When the tenants abuse the servants **and** the son, the owner comes to destroy the wicked tenants. It is significant to note that in Matthew's context, this is likely an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C as well as 70 A.D. However, contrary to the first two readings utilizing vineyard imagery today, Jesus's parable states that the vineyard itself will be preserved, but placed under new management. When the chief priests and elders of the people recognize that the parable is being told about them, they are also forced to realize that Jesus is telling them they need to be replaced as the leaders of God's people. This is to say that, at the very least, in our Gospel reading Jesus is speaking as a prophet like Isaiah. In fact, Matthew concludes this passage by reiterating how the chief priests and elders believed the crowd *regarded Jesus as a prophet.*

However, Jesus does not stop there. He furthers the parable in verses 42-45 in such a way that, in retrospect, it is plain to see that Jesus speaks already at the beginning of his parable as more than a prophet. He is in fact what one commentator called a "messianic claimant, one who is so close to God that he can speak from God's very heart."⁸ Furthermore, in verse 42 Jesus quotes Psalm 118, which speaks of the rejected stone that becomes a cornerstone in a building project. In doing so, Jesus is describing how "something or someone, rejected as useless, comes to be accepted as essential."⁹ It may have been unclear to the leaders what Jesus was referring to. We know, however, that Jesus is speaking of his coming crucifixion. We see that the stone is a person. Moreover, this person has something to do with the transfer of the vineyard to new tenants. One scholar noted that there is a potential play on words in the Hebrew that would link the rejected stone (*'eben*) with the rejected son (*bēn*) in the first half of the parable.¹⁰ This may be a

⁷ Harrington, *God's Vineyard in America: The Jesuit Review*.

⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew in Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 73.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

retrospective stretch. Regardless, in verse 43 Jesus audaciously gives his audience an additional hint in regard to how the transfer of leadership in God's kingdom is going to take place. He simply, but also audaciously utilizes the term *ethnos* for *people*. In the English, this is not a weighted word. However, in Hebrew and in ancient Israel this was a blanket term designated for any and all multiethnic outsiders outside the house of Israel. Jesus is undoubtedly referring to the multiethnic community of his followers, but to the chief priests and elders, this is enough to arrest him at that given moment in the temple. The kingdom of God is about to embark on a transformation that is incomprehensible to any law-abiding Israelite—that is, except for the likes of St. Paul.

In today's epistle reading, Paul begins by stating in verses 4-8 how he was circumcised properly. He is what my professor Matt Thiessen called an "eight-dayer". He is a Hebrew of Hebrew lineage. He is from the tribe of Benjamin. He goes as far to call himself *blameless* under the law. Needless to say, Paul is using hyperbole to demonstrate that no one has more to lose in their conversion to Christ than him. And yet, as one who is pressing toward the goal of heavenly union with God through Christ Jesus, he considers it all as a loss because of Christ. In fact, he calls it *rubbish*. Unthinkably, Paul becomes the apostle of the *ethné*, the outsider outside the house of Israel. Yet, as stated above, the crux of today's scripture readings is stated in Philippians 3, verses 10-11. It states: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection of the dead.* In Michael Gorman's text Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross he states that *knowing Christ* in verses 10-11 has a twofold meaning, knowing *both* "the power of the resurrection" and "the fellowship of his sufferings."¹¹ Gorman notes that Paul rarely uses the term for *suffering* when referring to Jesus. When he does so in verse 10, Paul is speaking to how we are called in verse 14 to presently conform to the death of Christ.

Is this truly what it means to do what Berry calls "practicing resurrection"? Suffering and Death? Truly I tell you, this is the point where I begin to tremble with great fear and intimidation before you. I can no longer hide. The unpacking of truth from today's readings is complete. I am confronted by the audacious examples of Isaiah, Christ, and Paul telling me to embrace the discomfort of this moment.

Needless to say, today's passages are about justice. Today's passages are about righteousness. Today's passages demonstrate how the two are intertwined together in an indiscernible vine. We cannot make sense of one without the other. Today's passages truly scare me. Today's passages draw me to moments of deep shame. Today's passages force me to stare in the face of the sins of omission in my life. Today's passages demonstrate to me how problematic and insufficient it is to study theology that speaks of and to the experience of injustice in my midst when it does not compel me to be a person who practices resurrection and produces fruit worthy of jubilation in the kingdom of God. In fact, God's Word today through the lectionary passages demonstrates to me how, when I speak of theology, I have more times than not simultaneously utilized words as a shield from my habit of inaction in the face of injustice, while also attempting to appease the fears I have when I read the stark reality of what my faith in our Triune God bids me to do.

¹¹ Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity; Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 330.

When I use today's readings as a litmus test for my life of faith I can say very assuredly that I have yielded what one commentator calls "rotten berries".¹² Therefore, if you feel attacked at the end of today's time together, know that I am first and foremost attacking myself, confessing my sins, and asking myself, "What level of injustice in our midst will it take for me to share in the *fellowship of Christ's suffering?*" Because it is evidently clear, only then will I begin to partake in the *power of the resurrection*.

Therefore, I would like to call our assembly here today to think how we can lean into and be conformed to what Gustavo Gutierrez calls an "institution of social criticism." In his work, *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutierrez calls the church to take on a spirit of liberation. May we as an assembly take the next step in our own spirit of liberation! This spirituality dares to sink roots in the soil of oppression-liberation. These roots must go deeper than the pegs of a sign that sits outside. Rather, Gutierrez asserts that a "spirituality of liberation will center on a *conversion* to the neighbor, the oppressed person, the exploited social class, the despised ethnic group, the dominated country. Conversion means a radical transformation of ourselves; it means thinking, feeling, and living as Christ—present in exploited and alienated persons. To be converted is to commit oneself to the process of liberation of the poor and oppressed, to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely. It means to commit oneself not only generously, but also with an analysis of the situation and a strategy of action."¹³ He continues when he states that, "There is no authentic conversion unless we break with our mental categories, with the way we relate to others, with our way of identifying with the Lord, with our cultural milieu, with our social class, in other words, with all that can stand in the way of a real, profound solidarity with those who suffer, in the first place, from misery and injustice."¹⁴ Only then, Gutierrez argues, a new person will rise from the old. May we follow the example of St. Paul. Take a look around—what started as an assembly centered on serving the poor and marginalized on the west side of town has turned into a group that has not been "careful not to fall into intellectual self-satisfaction, into a kind of triumphalism of erudite and advanced 'new' visions of Christianity."¹⁵ May we turn from our collective past of believing that posting a sign outside our doors proclaiming, "Black Lives Matter," is sufficient suffering for the people of the kingdom of God. May we not confuse any wild fruit for fruit worthy of jubilation. Thus, as Gutierrez suggests, "the only thing that is really new is to accept day by day the gift of the Spirit, who makes us love—in our concrete options to build a true human fellowship, in our historical initiatives to subvert an order of injustice—with the fullness, with which Christ has loved us."¹⁶ We are called to "active participation to liberate humankind from everything that dehumanizes it and prevents it from living according to the will of the Father."¹⁷ Thus, at stake in all of this, as today's readings centered on the vine suggest, is the Church's faithfulness to its Lord and its call to conform to the death of Christ.

Because, as I stated earlier, there is a vine of injustice in our midst today. It has deep roots in ostracizing the multiethnic outsider in our midst. And as John told us last week, we easily confuse the example of Jesus Christ in our midst. Now think back on when Pastor Rick and the

¹² Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 175.

¹³ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 118.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 174.

¹⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 174.

¹⁷ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 174.

Board decided to plant the Black Lives Matter sign in the front lawn for the first time. Think of the fear and discomfort it caused many of us. And yet now, it has become a part of who we are. No longer does it cause collective fear as it once did. However, I believe it is time to take the next step in our collective conversion and embrace the discomfort and fear of beginning to enact what that sign audaciously proclaims.

If we don't, we will fall into what James Cone calls, in The Cross and the Lynching Tree, a Niebuhr-like form of white supremacy.¹⁸ This form of white supremacy has “eyes to see” multiethnic suffering, write on it, speak about it, but it lacks the “heart to feel,” to feel it as its own. Going forward, may we turn to the multiethnic experience—specifically black suffering in our midst—to learn our theology. Because currently, what was once and still is being rejected as useless in our midst has revealed what is essential to practicing resurrection and producing the fruits of the kingdom of God. If we do not attempt to enter into the sufferings of Christ in our midst, may I be so audacious to claim that our fate is akin to what Cone reveals when he states, “The wise, the mighty, and the noble are condemned because their status in society tempts them to think too highly of their knowledge, power, and heritage.” Because as we hear in Isaiah today, the Lord our God *expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard the cry of the oppressed.*

¹⁸ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 36.