

The parable we heard this morning has all of the characteristics of a good story: a setting: the vineyard – complete with a winepress and watchtower; characters: the owner, the tenants, the slaves, and a son; and plenty of conflict: a beating, a stoning, and ultimately death. Unlike most stories in which conflict exists, though, this one doesn't have a clear protagonist or antagonist. We are dealing with an absent landlord, vengeful tenants, and powerless messengers. This is the story of a system that is broken. It raises questions about rights to the land, ownership, power, greed, and distribution of resources. This system relies on hierarchical structures and normalizes violence.

This kind of parable contains a realistic story with morally reprehensible characters that ensnare the listener in self-judgment. As we listen to this story, we are forced to situate ourselves in it. It's not hard to look at the world around us and recognize that we are entangled in a system that is similarly broken. We live in a dichotomy between feast and famine - excess food decomposes in landfills as families struggle to put food on their table, we have moved farther and farther away from knowing where our food comes from as fewer and fewer people own land, and the land itself is decimated by extractive practices that sustain such a system. We are the original tenants of God's vineyard, but have failed to live up to our original call. This parable demands that we ask the question: How do we, as modern-day tenants on a land that has been gifted to us, rewrite this story? To find the answer to this question, I think we need to go back to the very beginning.

From the beginning of scripture, we learn God loves the earth that God creates. God's first act is to create the heavens and the earth – God sweeps over the void and brings about light and life, declaring it very good. Out of the chaos, God forms order and beauty. Then, God creates first light, then sky, sea and dry ground, and vegetation in all forms. God creates the sun and the moon, the stars, sea life and birds, large and small animals. And after everything God says it is good. God blesses the goodness of the earth 6 times before he even creates humans. God spends the longest time with the rest of Creation. This is a God who takes joy and delights in what he has created.

Then, God creates humans. And the first words that God speaks to us are not about our relationship with each other or our relationship with God. They are actually about our relationship with Creation. God says, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

Now, unfortunately, this passage has been used over time to create an idea that humans are exceptional and sit at the top of the created order. This has been used to justify environmental degradation as we use and abuse the world's resources for our own gain. But, alternative interpretations of this text offer a different understanding of our role within the created order. Recent scholars have looked in ancient cultures around Israel to understand this idea of being created in the image of God. Stories from Egypt and Mesopotamia described kings as the images of particular gods. The king is seen as God's special representative on earth. If we are seen as God's representatives on earth, "having dominion" is better understood as exercising the same authority God would exercise in

the natural world. This means that our role is really that of caretaker - we are called to share in God's responsibility to the earth and to delight in and care for it as God does.

Helping the earth flourish was our first and only responsibility.

But we have always done a poor job tending to the garden. We so quickly traded in our hedge clippers and garden trowels for bulldozers and machines until God's creation has become unrecognizable.

We have cut deep into the earth, extracting oil, coal, and natural gas to power our lives. We have left deep scars in coral reefs at the depths of the sea, caused by increased ocean temperatures, rising levels of carbon dioxide, and pollution. We see the marks of overproduction, consumption, and expansion in the trash that piles in our landfills, in the empty spaces where trees once stood, and in the smog filled sky. We rely on the natural resources that have been gifted to us and know that we have not always been the best stewards of these resources. Over the last century, we have fallen into a deep reliance on fossil fuels, commercial agriculture, and single-use products.

We have written the story of a system that is broken.

Our planet bleeds from the systems and structures that prioritize money and production over sustainability. The impacts of our actions have reverberated around the world as, globally, we face the risks associated with changing weather patterns and sea level rise and the unequal distribution of resources. As the planet bleeds from the wounds we have inflicted, we know that we are leaving the deepest scars in the most vulnerable of our communities. We have lost our connection to the earth as we have become farther and farther removed from the garden we were once told to cultivate and care for.

Like the story we heard this morning, this is a story of power, of violence, and of injustice that fuels conflict. The parable serves as a reminder that when all is not as it should be we need to account for the role we have played in making it this way.

It would be easy to end this sermon right here. To conclude that the system is just, indeed, broken. That God created the earth and abandoned it. That we have failed - because what else is expected from us in a system such as this? It would be easy to walk away right now and keep doing what we've been doing. But, we know that this is not where the story ends. We know that there is a new story that we are still writing.

We know that God is very much alive and with us today, working in and through God's messengers, to remind us of who we are and how we are called into a different way of living. Throughout scripture, the prophets aim to bring people back to God, particularly when an entire tribe or nation has turned away from God and God's commandments. The prophets look at the world around them and see that all is not as it should be. People rebel against God - we forget who we are and where we came from - so the prophets remind us of our call to care for one another and for the land.

This parable in Matthew is drawn from one originally told by Isaiah in chapter 5 verses 1-7. Isaiah's version of the parable follows a similar storyline: a landowner carefully plants a vineyard with the best vines, he builds a watchtower and cuts a winepress. But the vineyard only yields bad fruit. And so, the landowner threatens to destroy the vineyard – to make it a wasteland. In this parable, the vineyard is the nation of Israel and it is in disarray because the Israelites have not lived according to God's commandments. Isaiah, like the other prophets of his time, call the people of Israel out for their social injustices. Specifically, Isaiah accuses the people of living extravagantly, of being greedy with the land, and of overindulging. They have created inequity and have undermined traditional practices of land distribution and stewardship. The people have fallen into the traps of a broken system and Isaiah's message is clear: when we neglect to care for each other and the land, the results are devastating.

When we fail to live according to God's vision, prophet after prophet remind us who we are and they call us into a different way of living. Jesus reminds us that we are called to be radical truth-tellers and bold peacemakers. He teaches us that this requires a kind of peacemaking that flips the script – that puts the first last, accepts the outcast and marginalized, and uproots social conventions. These prophets teach us lessons about power, the dangers of living into unjust economic and political systems, and our responsibilities toward the most vulnerable in our communities. They teach us that land is not property – that is a gift from God and that we are entrusted to care for it for future generations and to ensure that all of God's people benefit from the fruits of the fields.

This parable cautions us against the temptation to ignore the cries of God's messengers who tell us that all is not as it should be.

God meets us in the midst of uncertainty and shows us a new way. We become the prophets of our own time when we offer a new version of the story. For we do know who we are. We are caretakers: made from the dust and dirt of the earth, filled with God's breath of life, we are, and always have been, called into the work of restoring God's creation so all life might flourish.

There is another way to live in this world.

We rewrite the story when we hold those in power responsible for their decisions and when we advocate to our elected officials for just policies that will reduce our carbon footprint and better protect impacted communities. We rewrite the story when we refuse single use bottles and plastic bags at the grocery store, grow our own food to share with those in need, when we put solar panels on our homes and churches and walk, bike, or take public transportation when we can. In all these ways we serve as public witnesses to a different way of living. Jesus tells us that this work won't be easy, that it probably won't be popular, and that it might even be risky. But, God gives us a vision of a world that is flourishing: a world where broken systems are disrupted, where resources are distributed equally, where violence and pain are no more and peace prevails.

We know how this story eventually ends - we are told that one day there will be a New

Creation – a creation where justice is restored for all people and for the earth itself. We are invited to live into this hope and into the anticipation of our eventual reconciliation with all of creation. We are assured a prosperous future - where life is abundant, where creation lives in harmony, where the land flourishes, the waters are overflowing, the trees bring forth fruit and provide shade, and justice reigns for ALL of God's people. This is God's promise to us. As we find ourselves wondering who we are in this story, may we remember that we are God's co-laborers, commissioned to work alongside God to restore creation to its original goodness and bring justice to our communities. Now is the time to get to work fulfilling God's vision.