October 4, 2026 — Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 5:1-7 | Matthew 21:33-46 – *One Vineyard, Two Stories: A Harvest We Didn't Plant*

I've mentioned in previous sermons about the chaos gardening method I'm using for this year. For the most part, it's actually worked. My front flowerbed is filled with a variety of wildflowers of every color. It may look overgrown until you get closer and see the life that is blossoming from it.

There's a big difference though between randomly throwing seed at a patch of dirt and being handed a vineyard or especially trying to start a vineyard. When my grandparents retired, they decided to leave suburban life behind and bought a piece of land south of Pittsburgh in Washington, PA and dubbed it The Farm. I never got to see it, this was all years before I was born. It wasn't anywhere near the size of the farms around this area, more like a hobby farm so that they could grow their own fruits and vegetables.

One of the things that stood out about The Farm was that my grandfather decided to plant a small vineyard so that he could make his own wine. He even went as far as buying all the equipment needed to make the wine once he had a suitable grape harvest. This came up in a conversation with my parents recently and I couldn't help but laugh at the thought of my grandfather doing this because he was not a patient man. He would take my sister and I out for mini golf when my grandparents would come up for their summer visit and he would get frustrated if a group ahead of us was taking too long. So he was the last person I ever imagined taking the time to do something like start a vineyard. And sure enough, my grandparents sold The Farm and moved to Florida only a few years later.

Having a vineyard isn't luck. It's hard work. From the clearing of the land to choosing the right vines to building the necessary infrastructure to maintaining it. Every bit of this work comes from expecting a harvest in the end that makes all of it worth it. It takes patience and determination.

This morning we have a tale of not two vineyards, but the same one, just from different perspectives. Both Isaiah and Matthew start the same — a vineyard planted on a fertile hill, cleared of stones. A winepress is dug out and a watchtower is built so that someone can keep an eye on the vineyard. That's where the similarities end. Isaiah's telling is a love song to a people who God loves, Jesus' parable in Matthew is a lesson for a people who won't listen.

Isaiah's telling of this story is all about expectations — the owner of the vineyard wanting one thing and the opposite happening instead. In this telling, Isaiah says that the vineyard was filled with "choice vines", the best of the best meant to yield

grapes suitable for wine. And yet, even with the right conditions and proper care, these choice vines didn't yield what was expected.

Many translations will say they yielded "wild grapes" but that doesn't quite do the original Hebrew justice. The translation of our reading is much closer to the stronger language used. Wild grapes, while unsuitable for wine, are not a terrible thing and would not have appeared on these choice vines. However, "rotten, putrid grapes" carry a more intense feeling. These are grapes that have suddenly turned, despite the care given. This is a clear case of something not turning out as planned or expected.

While Isaiah focused on the vines themselves, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is focused on the people working the vineyard. While previous parables were directed at the disciples or the crowds, this one in particular is directed at the religious authorities.

In this parable, the grapes grew just fine in this vineyard, so the landowner sent representatives to collect the harvest from the workers. Twice the tenants killed the representatives of the landowner, so the landowner sends his son, assuming they'll respect him. The problem is the landowner miscalculated how the tenants would respond. The problem here was never the capacity of the vineyard, rather it was a refusal to listen and respect.

Jesus wants us to see who's who in this. The tenants are the religious and civil authorities of the time — the ones put in charge of tending the vineyard and everything it was meant to produce. The representatives sent to collect the harvest are the prophets, sent again and again to call those authorities back to what they'd been entrusted with. And the son the landowner finally sends, certain he'll be respected where the servants weren't, is Jesus — killed outside the vineyard by the very people charged with its care.

The tenants didn't just fail to do what they were asked, they answered the ask with violence. And Isaiah, centuries earlier, had already named exactly this kind of failure, down to the sound of it.

I want to point out some interesting word play in Isaiah that gets lost in translation. The final verse says *He expected justice but saw bloodshed, righteousness but heard a cry!* The Hebrew for justice is "mishpat" while bloodshed is "mispach" and the Hebrew for righteousness is "tsedaqah" while cry is "tse'aqah" The point being, one thing was expected but they got something else instead that sounded similar but was vastly different.

So what happens to a vineyard like this — one that's given everything and still turns rotten, or one that's tended by hands that answer every collector with violence?

For starters, Isaiah doesn't offer much in the way of comfort. The song from Isaiah goes on to describe the vineyard laid waste — the hedge removed, the wall torn down, the vines left to be trampled, overgrown with briers and thorns, and the ground dry and barren. No new tenant. No replanting. Just a field handed over to whatever grows there once no one is tending it on purpose. If Isaiah were the whole story, that would be where this sermon ends: a good vineyard, ruined, and nothing after that.

But Matthew doesn't leave it there. After the parable, Jesus tells the religious leaders plainly that the vineyard will be given to others – to *a people producing fruits of the kingdom*. I want to be careful here though, because that line has been misused for centuries, with some implying that one religion is replacing another. That's not what's happening here. Jesus is a Jewish teacher, speaking to Jewish leadership, about accountability for that they were entrusted with — not transferring this responsibility from one people to a different one. The question was never who gets to hold the deed. It was always about what actually grows once someone's caring for the vineyard.

What both endings share, bleak and hopeful alike, is this: the owner doesn't walk away from the vineyard. In Isaiah, God lets it go to seed. In Matthew, God replants it. In neither one does God give up on the ground itself, only on the arrangement that failed it.

That's the difference between the vineyard my grandfather tried to start and my flowerbed. My grandfather never lacked the land or even the equipment — he had the wine press waiting in storage. What he didn't have was the patience to see the grapes all the way to the finish line at harvest and so The Farm went from an idea to just another family story. In the case of my flowerbed, I never had my grandfather's ambition or the tools needed. I just threw the wildflower seeds at random and let whatever took come up. And it's alive and blooming — it may look overgrown and unruly, but it's alive.

Isaiah's vineyard had everything going for it and it still didn't yield what was hoped. The vineyard in Jesus' parable had good grapes the whole time —- the trouble wasn't the vines but the hands that were in charge of them. And somewhere between the two is where most of us actually live: not lacking what we

need, not always refusing what we're asked, but somewhere in the gap between what was planted and what's actually growing.

Now I should be honest about what I mean when I say my flowerbed is alive. From the road, it looks like I stopped taking care of it. It looks like it's overgrown with weeds and thistles. You have to get up close to see that what's growing is intentional, or at least it isn't nothing. To see the pops of color from the various flowers, the bees buzzing around and the butterflies taking refuge. It's not the growth one would expect.

That's where Isaiah leaves us too, if you don't rush past it. Briers and thorns aren't empty ground because empty ground doesn't grow anything. Briers are what a vineyard becomes when it's left — not blank or paused, but full of something else. The land doesn't stop producing just because it's not being tended anymore. It produces whatever comes up.

The moral of these scripture readings isn't that we need to tend our vineyards better, try harder, or be a better tenant. We've probably heard that sermon before and we don't need to hear these stories to come to that conclusion. It just goes without saying really.

Instead, I want us to focus on this, something is growing in whatever has gone untended our lives right now, whether individually or as the church. Not what *should* be growing but what is growing. Some part of you, some relationship, some corner of this congregation, some patch of ground you stopped looking close enough to actually see — it isn't empty, it's growing something.

The question then becomes, do we let it continue to grow to see what comes from it or yank it out because we feel it doesn't belong and we would rather try to get the vineyard back to what it was, even if it failed? There's no clean answer to that question, but sometimes what looks like a weed is the first thing that's taken root in a long time and that new growth should be allowed to flourish. Because not everything that is unplanned or a change is a threat to the harvest — sometimes it actually is the harvest, just not what we were expecting.

And that's not new. It was true in Isaiah's day, true in Jesus', and it remains true in ours. The harvest was never going to look like what we planted. What God is growing in us and in this congregation rarely matches what we expected to find. And maybe — just maybe — that was God's intention all along.

And all of God's people said Amen!