

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 8, 2017  
Matthew 21:33-46

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### **Grape and Grain: Better Stories**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Indeed, grace and peace be unto you, most precious people of God here at St. Thomas Church. It is such a delight to be in this pulpit again after so many weeks away. And I thank you again for the most excellent party last Sunday commemorating this 500<sup>th</sup> year of reformation and celebrating my 35 years of ministry. It was a blast.

This is most certainly true.

And what a delight to see that the gospel before us this morning involves an organic, biological, viticultural metaphor. Jesus, faced with opposition and questions about his authority, speaks of a vineyard and those who see to its care. It is one of the prevalent images for God's people, this talk of vineyards, vines, and grapes. And here, judgment is pronounced against those who fail to return to the landowner the appropriate portion. In the story, Jesus turns the meaning towards himself. Matthew depicts Jesus drawing on Psalm 118 and Isaiah to add another metaphor of judgment, that of a stone, once rejected, that becomes the cornerstone. Jesus points to his foundational work in salvation and building God's kingdom. Those who try to find fruitful living other than in God are as those who beat their heads against a rock. Jesus calls us to look to the cornerstone as the proper source of good fruit.

My delight in this metaphor expands as it opens itself up. Yes, the parable wants us to see Israel as the vineyard, God as the owner, and religious leaders of Jesus' day as the unfaithful and deceitful caretakers.

But after many weeks of considering land caretaking by people in places that differ significantly from ours (that's what I've been doing these past months), you may not be surprised to hear me suggest different characters for this story. Yes, God remains the owner, the creator, the one who made and sustains the components that make for a healthy vineyard—soil, rain, minerals, organic material, microbes, worms, mycorrhizal fungi, seeds. The vineyard, I suggest, is all of creation. And we are the ones who are entrusted with the caretaking. It's a clear stewardship theme.

I'll let you play out in your own prayer and contemplation what this parable means in that expanded context. I shouldn't have all of the fun of this work. I hope you will take the time to playfully engage this intriguing text. But I will suggest a direction or two.

As I began considering what to say this morning, many horrendous events of the past several months flooded into consciousness. I'll just suggest them; you know the details: Charlottesville, Harvey, Irma, Maria, Mexico, North Korea, forest fires, Washington, D.C., Las Vegas. I have wondered how God was at work in you and through those who preached the word in my absence to bring the gospel to bear on such things.

In the end, I believe that we need to remember and to proclaim that we have better stories, and then to act based on what they imply. These catastrophes, disasters, and tragedies never get the last word. God does. And we are God's hands and feet and voices doing God's work in the world. God work; our hands!

So. Here's a better story.

I don't like to travel by air. The obvious reason is my size; it is very hard to find seats that fit my legs. My knees take a beating.

So, I decided to drive rather than fly to each major destination. All in all, it was probably fifteen thousand miles. But that provided opportunities that would never otherwise have presented themselves. You'll hear about several of those in coming weeks. But the one I want to share today came near the beginning of our adventure. When plotting a route to Santa Fe, which is near the first planned destination—a retreat center called Ghost Ranch, it occurred to me that The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas is on the way. Plus it got us near some major prairie land education centers (for example, Manhattan, Kansas, the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, and Bethany College). By the way, the National Preserve contains some of the four percent of native prairie that remains in the United States. Four percent!

The Land Institute was started in 1983 by Wes Jackson, one of the authors that Marie and I particularly appreciate. He had a vision to develop perennial grain crops. And the institute is doing just that.

On our tour of the institute and its acres, we heard things like this: "Well, Wes figures that we have one more shot to get agriculture right. 10,000 years ago, when humans domesticated various grain species for their use, they gave up the perennial feature for the sake of larger grain heads. In the process, they condemned agriculture to the problems we now see in spades—depleted top soil, compaction, loss of organic structure, nutrient degradation, salinity, fertilizer leaching into water systems, and so on. He figures we have perhaps enough years left before the top soil is more profoundly degraded to correct our early agricultural mistakes."

Jackson calls it the "10,000 year problem." It was about 10,000 years ago that the wheat plant was developed from its wild ancestors in the Zagros mountains of Western Iran. That was the moment when nature began to be plowed up. So soil erosion has had a ten millennia history, adding the contamination of chemical fertilizers

and pesticides in more recent times. It has all led to the loss of about 30 million acres or arable land per year worldwide to degradation and desertification.

Our guide at The Land Institute pointed to a monoculture field across the road. “That,” he said, “is what Jackson calls human cleverness.” Then he pointed to a prairie next to the institute filled with many species of plants and humming with life. “That Jackson calls divine wisdom.” The institute is focused on learning from the way God made things, mimicking natural systems, developing productive polycultures of perennials, leaving soils intact, and striving to live alongside the land rather than trying to bend it to our will—not adapting our places to our purposes, but rather, adapting ourselves to the genius of the places where we live.

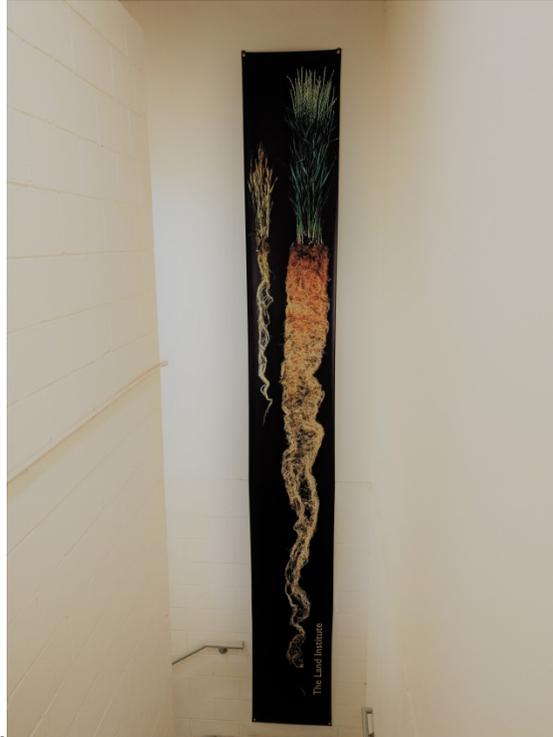
It’s about getting to know and to love our place, learn from it, and work with it to live alongside the land sustainably and respectfully, with gratitude and love. Jackson is about loving, consulting, and mimicking the genius of the prairie before it disappears. He speaks of his vision in this way: “When I said it would take between 50 and 100 years I was 40 years old. There aren’t very many people who want to make a commitment to something like that. We like to joke that if you are working on something you can finish in your lifetime, you’re not thinking big enough.”

After years of searching, testing, and selecting, in 2003 The Land Institute started a breeding program for intermediate wheatgrass native to Eurasia. Multiple rounds of selecting and inter-mating the best plants based on their yield, seed size, disease resistance, and other traits have been performed, resulting in a much improved perennial grain. They’re working with legumes too, in order to offer intercropping, polyculture opportunities, to avoid the problems of monoculture plantings, and to increase yields.

Kernza, as the new grain is called, is already being used in a small niche market. We found the product in Portland, Oregon—a beer called “Long Root Ale.” It was the first marketed product from the new grain and became available only last fall. Yes, we even drank some. I guess I can admit that now that we’ve had beer right here at St. Thomas. That was last Sunday for you sorry souls who didn’t make it to the party.

The work isn’t complete yet. They have increased seed size to two or three times the original; it’s comparable to the size of wheat kernels in 1930. They don’t expect that the seeds will reach 50% of annual bread wheat size for about 10 years. Still, in time, they hope to develop a variety with yields similar to annual wheat and to see Kernza grown widely.

This, dear friends, is a better story. This is a fine example of faithful caretakers who hold a vision of a better future for those who dwell in the land of God’s fruitful kingdom. Soil erosion may yet one day be reduced significantly with grains that have deep roots, holding soil structure in place as they have for millennia.



(SHOW PICTURE).

Kernza's perennial roots are more than ten feet long. You can see that the bread wheat roots are less than half that length. So Kernza requires less irrigation and fertilizer to thrive. Even more significant, it sequesters immense quantities of carbon from the atmosphere, unlike the vast swaths of corn, soybeans, and wheat we see along the road. Those release carbon from the soil every time they are tilled for a new planting, exacerbating the climate change problems associated with greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide.

Tilling, one hopes, will become mostly a thing of the past, since perennials do not require annual planting. Tillage destroys much of the biological activity in the soil, leaving it lifeless, robbed of its fertility, and susceptible to erosion from wind and rain. Much of the topsoil in places like Kansas has been washed into rivers and streams, and then into oceans.

Perennial wheat sprouts from the same roots year after year, unlike regular wheat and almost every other commercially produced grain, which require annual replanting. Fertilizers, as they are needed, will stay closer to where they are placed and leech away in smaller quantities.

By the way, similar work is being done with rice and other significant grains.

Many in the vineyard, our Lord suggests, seek to destroy. Many want to thwart the good plans of the Owner. And troubles of many sorts arise.

But we have a better story to tell. Our God is a gracious God, who provides the basic tools we need, an abiding presence to guide us, the promise of abundance, and actually trusts us to get the work done. We are co-creators with our God. Wes Jackson is a prime example. And God is patient, trying again and again to lead and guide us into right paths, fruitful ways, and redemptive relationships. It is our privilege and our joy to tend this potential-filled vineyard. It is our charge to honor its maker and the Creator's representatives as they look for a share of the fruits for the benefit of others. And it is our grateful pleasure to serve the one whose name is above every other and whose life, death, and resurrection motivate us to press on toward the goals of God's kingdom.

While watching a children's movie this week titled "A Monster Calls" (2016), the tree monster, voiced by Liam Neeson, makes this rather profound statement: "Stories are wild creatures, Conor O'Malley. When you let them loose, who knows what havoc they may wreak."

May our better stories lead us to shape the world more fully with godly values and policies and actions and ways of being in this very troubled world. Who knows what blessed havoc may be wrought. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant life. Amen.