

In our OT lesson this morning from Isaiah, we read, "My beloved had a vineyard, and he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes; and he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; and expected righteousness, but heard a cry."

And in our Gospel from St. Matthew, we hear Jesus tell about the parable of the vineyard, and after the owner's son is killed, he says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

Jesus addressed today's parable to the chief priests and elders of the people - and it delivered a sad commentary on their leadership. This parable is about stewardship. And as stewards of the vineyard these religious people were to tend the vine by keeping people aware of God's mercy, compassion and love. They were to care for God's precious possession, God's own people.

They had been given every opportunity to become individual and collective images of God who would reflect the goodness of God to all people in the world. They were supposed to harvest peace, justice, mutual love and service. Those blessed with God's love were to care for one another with a generosity that imitated their creator. But instead they continued a pattern of destroying god's messengers, and eventually God's son.

Now, I suspect that most of us do not identify with the evil tenants in the story, who are the religious leaders of the time. Somehow we believe that we would not ignore the expectations of God and certainly we would not have crucified Jesus. But in reality, today's parable is speaking to each one of us. We are the religious people and leaders of our time, and we need to heed Jesus' challenge to us this morning.

"Our God expects justice, but sees bloodshed." What are any of us doing about the violence and guns and drugs in our schools, streets and communities? What are any of us doing to try to influence our government to spend more on education and less on the weapons of war.

"Our God expects righteousness, but hears only crying." What are any of us doing to stand up against prejudice and discrimination and the unequal treatment of any of God's children, especially minorities and those who may be different than ourselves.

"Our God expects to yield grapes, but receives only wild grapes." What are any of us doing to help ourselves and others stop the merry-go-round of greed that continues to widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots. A Roman Lucius Seneca, living during the time of Jesus, wrote, "It is not the person who has little who is poor, but the person who constantly craves more, that is poor." The tenants in Jesus' parable were obsessed with greed. The willingness of any of us who would step on, over and through anyone to feed our greed is proof that our society has not changed much since Jesus' time.

What are any of us doing to live in greater harmony with our loved ones, as we struggle to make relationships work and to be effective parents – not to mention our inability to deal with our addictions, conflict, anger or our inability to put an end to domestic violence.

And what are any of us doing to make sure we elect politicians to uphold God's expectations for justice and righteousness in the treatment of God's peoples and God's creation - our earth.

If there's one thing that's very clear to me about our world, it is that much work needs to be done in God's vineyard. Martin Luther King once said, "While we are under a mandate to preach God's grace, it is a dangerous thing to do. Because in preaching God's free gift we must be careful not to lose sight of the fact that the god of Grace is also the God of expectation." May each of us never lose sight of the fact that there is much work to be done in God's vineyard.

So, as the religious people and leaders of our time, what can we do to be better stewards of God's vineyard?

A piece of prose recently crossed my desk that gives some helpful ideas. It goes like this:

I will do more than belong – I will participate.
I will do more than care – I will help.
I will do more than give – I will give generously.
I will do more than believe – I will practice.
I will do more than be fair – I will be kind.
I will do more than teach – I will serve.
I will do more than live – I will grow.
I will do more than forgive – I will love.

Clearly the death of the vineyard's son foreshadows the death and resurrection of Jesus, as Jesus becomes the cornerstone of our faith and the promise of our salvation. May the grace of God that we experience in the presence of Christ in the communion we share this morning inspire us to be good stewards of the vineyard of all of God's peoples - and give us grateful hearts for the privilege of serving them – because we are the religious people and leaders of our time.