

I come to you in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

My favorite place in the entire world is up on a mountain (or a big hill). I have a number of these spots that I can recall in my life, whether it be at the top of Scotchman Peak looking out across the untouched wilderness, at Winston Rock at Camp Cross looking all the way into Coeur d'Alene, at the top of Schweitzer overlooking Lake Pend Oreille, or hiking on Mt. Rainier, visiting Colorado, there is something so special about looking out across creation, taking in the immense beauty that is on display in this world. That is where I connect with God on a deep, spiritual level. And how can you not?

The beauty of creation constantly speaks to me. This world was created with such care and precision, and yet is also so wonderfully wild and unpredictable. From the rolling hills of the palouse, to the beauty of a tropical island, to the unique beauty of the Konza Prairie in Kansas, I have had the privilege to experience creation in its various forms, but for me, nothing can beat the vantage point of being on a mountain and looking out over as much creation as you can take in. Partly, it is the reality of the great diversity of the world that exists around us, something that can be hard to see from the ground level. Partly, there is the sense that up on a mountain, as the air thins, as the world quiets around you, you physically become closer to God as much as you become spiritually closer to God. And, it becomes even more precious and powerful, when I am reminded that I am responsible for all of this creation. I am not simply responsible for my little yard, or the small slice of creation in my immediate vicinity, but rather, I am, we are, responsible for all of creation. A reality that comes to the forefront when up on a mountain, taking it all in.

This beautiful creation that we have been charged with caring for, a charge that comes from the very beginning of creation with our creation story in Genesis, being named the stewards of this creation, is the well appointed vineyard in today's gospel. Here God has built a vineyard, set everything up so that it is enabled to be successful, and then has turned it over to laborers to tend to it, to care for it, to grow more, to produce for the time of harvest. And we do work it. Environmental concerns are constantly at the forefront of many conversations. We understand that we've done a poor job of caring for this creation, whether intentional or not, and are working to better this place, our home, our vineyard we have been entrusted with. But, this is also part of the problem. Sometimes we lose sight of who we are working this creation for. We lose sight of why we should care for creation. We speak of environmental concerns as necessary changes in order to protect ourselves, in order to better this world for us and our further consumption of its resources.

But, where is God in that conversation? For, this vineyard that we call creation is not ours. We are simply the laborers who have been tasked with caring for it. This creation is God's. The work we have done was supposed to have been done for God's harvest, not for our own betterment. And as we try to reverse the damage we have done to this creation, we must remember that we are reversing damage done to God's creation, that we are caring for this place because we are grateful to have it. When we care for this place for selfish reasons, to promote a sense that creation is ours, that the resources are for us to use, we lose sight of what our actual task is in this place. As the stewards of creation, we should never have gotten to this point, where global warming seems all but inevitable. As the stewards of creation, we must work to reverse the harm we have done, not just for our

own benefit, but as a sign of repentance for the sins we have committed against God's creation. As the stewards of creation, we must again embrace the reality that God's creation is given to us to bring us closer to God, not to be used for our own advancement.

It is this understanding, that God's creation is given to us to bring us closer to God, not to be used for our own advancement, that is at play when we reject the vineyard owner for our own gain. We are the wicked tenants. We reject God, we reject Christ. This rejection is clear by those who claim atheism, who hold up man as the ideal, who look only at what effects their immediate reality. This rejection is clear by those who want to claim the label "spiritual but not religious" as a means to rely on their individual self in connecting to the holy, something that can be accomplished, but only in fragments, for it is in community that the full reality of the holy is experienced.

But this particular gospel lesson is not so much about those people who reject God. The audience that Jesus is addressing with this parable is the religious leaders of his time, and stands as a constant measuring stick for the religious leaders of our time. Creation, the kingdom of heaven, is not something for us to claim for ourselves. Rather, it is our responsibility to tend to it, to care for it, and to make it available for those who seek it. When religious leaders go against this purpose, they reject Christ, just as the wicked tenants do today.

This rejection is seen in promoting the prosperity gospel, dishonest and immoral teaching that encourages those with little to give, to give it all, so that leadership can buy private jets, five thousand dollar suits, the newest luxury cars, so their wives can upgrade

the carat count of their wedding rings. And for what? So that money will magically grow on trees and be returned to those who give?

The rejection of Christ, the rejection of creation as a gift to us as opposed to a tool for us to use for our own means, leads religious leaders to declare that natural disasters are a punishment by God for whatever hot button political issue they want to hold up that day. The rejection of Christ by today's religious leaders occurs when they publicly support those in positions of authority who refuse to do anything to help fix the damage that we have done to God's creation, because it would harm their own bottom line.

Our rejection of Christ, our rejection of the owner of this vineyard that we call creation, is important to recognize, because if only affects us, it does not affect Christ. Christ is the cornerstone upon which our understanding of creation is built. Even as that stone was rejected, it nevertheless stands strong as the cornerstone, never wavering, never breaking, holding up this entire creation, holding up our ability to enter into a relationship with God, with Christ, if we understand our role in this vineyard. When we reject Christ, we fall against this cornerstone and are broken into pieces. All of our attempts to reject Christ, to reject God, will fail as we continually break ourselves apart across this cornerstone. As we rise up and try to take creation for ourselves, it will be taken from us and given to new tenants.

We are broken. We all reject Christ, reject God. Sometimes it's not quite as drastic as literally killing the son of the owner as we try to hoard the vineyard for ourselves. Sometimes it's as simple as failing to love our neighbor as ourself. Sometimes it's as small as throwing a recyclable item in the trash when the recycling can stands right next to it.

Regardless of the action, we all reject Christ, and are broken because of it. And, that is why we come to church. We know that we are broken. We know that fighting against the cornerstone is futile, that it will shatter us, rather than the other way around. And so we come here seeking a different path. We come here seeking a different result, a result that is predicated on us growing in understanding, in changing our hearts and minds, in accepting the reality of our place and role in this creation, and living into this reality.

We come to church seeking forgiveness. Forgiveness that we know is available here, if we simply ask. We come to church seeking salvation. Salvation that we know is available through God if we simply live for God, rather than for ourselves. We come to church seeking grace, for it is in church that grace abounds and it is the grace of God that comforts us, strengthens us, inspires us to understand that as the laborers of the vineyard, as the stewards of creation, we are tasked with caring for this place for God, because it is not here for us to use, it is here for us to give thanks for God, to connect to God on a deeper spiritual level, by connecting to that which God personally created. Whether it be on a mountain or simply looking out from our vantage right here on the South Hill, take in all of creation and know that we are the stewards of this earth, tasked with preparing the harvest.

Amen.