

Stewards of the Vineyard
Berkeley Friends Church
Matthew 21:33-40
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Matthew 21:33-40: "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Form: Parable, theme-based

Function (what the sermon does): provides ways for people to imagine a different life, and start moving in that direction, aka offer hope by envisioning a future goal and articulating specific steps to get us there.

Focus (what the sermon says): We know we need to be good stewards of the Earth. How do we do this in a way that doesn't just overwhelm us into inaction? Hope.

Introduction

If you were here yesterday for Quaker Heritage Day, you heard me talk about the importance of caring for the planet, the reasons this is important for us as followers of Jesus, the good, the bad, and the ugly in Christian and Quaker theology as pertains to creation care, and some thoughts about how to turn around and go a different direction in our ability and willingness to live as creatures in the midst of God's creation.

But, while most of us are likely to say that, yes, we want to be better stewards of creation, it's easier said than done. It can feel overwhelming to think about all the environmental problems that are going on, and our own efforts can feel small and insignificant in comparison. It can be difficult to maintain hope in the face of so much environmental degradation, injustice, and the most negative parts of human nature.

So today, I'm going to talk about hope. First, I'm going to re-tell the parable of the vineyard, then I'm going to talk about what hope looks like, from my study of scripture, psychology, and philosophy. Finally, I'm going to offer some hopeful examples of people taking steps toward environmental care.

The Parable

Matthew 21:33-40: "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Usually we read this passage in the context of people misunderstanding who Jesus was, and not getting the fact that he's the Messiah. I like to interpret it in a way that places this blame on myself, recognizing times when I have misunderstood. But I want us to focus on a part of this parable that I think we don't often pay attention to: God has set us up as stewards of the vineyard—or of this planet, if we take it allegorically. I thought the vineyard imagery was particularly fitting due to our location here, pretty close to California's wine country.

So, if we're supposed to be stewards of this vineyard, if we're tenants here, taking care of this place for the Creator, how do we do that? I'm assuming that most of us want to be good stewards of this place, but how?

And those tenants in the parable seem pretty hopeless, right?

What if we imagine the landowner giving the land to some new tenants? Remember—both the old and the new tenants represent ourselves, depending on how we choose to act.

So I'm going to tell a parable that can help us imagine this vineyard if we cared for it and recognized God as the Creator and ourselves as caretakers, rather than ourselves as the owners who have a right to all it produces.

Imagine there's a vineyard available for rent out in Napa County. The previous tenants haven't done a great job with it, but there's a good infrastructure built up: gnarled old vines that need some TLC but are planted in good soil. A wine press, and maybe a rickety old house. A young couple has fallen in love with the land, and they are so excited about the prospect of making really great wine. They plan to do this by putting every ounce of love and care they can into growing and harvesting their grapes, and passionately practicing their craft in order to make an artisanal local organic wine, perhaps to be paired with a local goat cheese and some bread from a nearby bakery. So this young couple is so excited to try to find a piece of land where they can practice their craft. They recognize they have no idea how to make wine besides what they've read in books, but they hope that they can learn, and they're open to learning from others.

They meet with the landowner of the vineyard we've just heard about, the one where the previous tenants did not exactly care for it, and, in fact, murdered any of the landowner's envoys, though there's no way to prove it. At this meeting, the landowner sees this young couple and sees that they are passionate about treating this land well, and bringing forth the best fruit the land can support. The landowner also sees that this young couple is clueless—they have no real experience. They can envision the wine they want to produce so clearly they can almost taste it. They are ready to put in countless hours of labor and to do so with love. They are open to learning, and they've started reading. In fact, they've read everything this landowner has written on the subject of vineyards and winemaking, and they can quote much of it verbatim.

And so, the landowner makes a decision. The landowner decides to move back onto this piece of land, and invite this young couple to work the land alongside. Every day they work together, side by side. As the couple works, they listen to the landowner tell stories of that land, the vintages that have grown out of it in years past, the previous tenants, the faithful stewards who have worked it before. They listen as the landowner tells them about pruning a vine just here, caring for the soil, collecting and distributing water, dealing with pests, when is the exact time to harvest, and what to do to produce the wine. Sometimes the landowner invites the young couple to help come up with a creative solution to a novel or unusual problem, and they work together to make it happen. Sometimes, these ideas fail miserably, and sometimes a serendipitous new discovery is made that makes the wine even better.

The first few vintages of this couple's wine are terrible, and sometimes they wonder why the landowner even lets them help at all. But at the same time, they are so grateful that they get to be part of the process, they hold tenaciously to their dream, and step by step they see themselves becoming the skilled crafts-people they envisioned when they came to the land.

The seasons pass, and the young couple is not so young anymore. They have children, and teach them the ways of the landowner. They tell their children the stories and teach the craft. The children also learn firsthand from the landowner, and the landowner delights in hearing their ideas. And new stories are created as the family grows up being nourished by and nourishing the land.

The Parable Explained

Now, I don't know about you, but this second story gives me a lot more hope. And I challenge us this morning to think of the not-so-good tenants **AND** the young couple in the second story as parts of ourselves. Because at least for me, I notice that there are days when I feel like the old tenants, and days when I feel like the new ones. And maybe these tenants aren't so different. Maybe the old tenants were just the same as the new ones: just as clueless about how to grow grapes and make wine, but they made different choices about what to do in that situation.

The old tenants, out of fear, locked down their land, struggled on their own to try to produce what they could from this land that wasn't theirs, and refused to give even a drop to the landowner. But the new tenants face life with joy and passion. They are teachable. They are open to community. They have a vision and they work hard to make that vision a reality. When an obstacle pops up between them and their goal, they brainstorm and problem solve and tenaciously hold on to their vision until they can bring it to fruition, and they try again if they fail the first time (or the first several times).

So this story brings me a lot of hope, and I've been focusing on the theme of hope recently in my studies. I want to share with you a little bit about what I've been learning about hope, because I think that bringing it to our conscious minds can help us be aware of what we're doing, and start actively moving in the direction we want to go. We'll talk about **three things**: hope and the prophets, what hope is, and then apply hope to the environmental situation we're in right now.

Hope & the Prophets

First: hope and the prophets. I've felt for a long time like Quakers are kind of a people of prophets. So when I read an article a while back that talked about climatologists as the prophets of our time, crying doom and destruction like biblical prophets, in some ways, I was excited and interested, and thought this was a good way of thinking about prophets.

But then I got thinking about the full role of a prophet. There's the doom and gloom part, but there's also the part about offering hope to the people, a vision of a time when it won't be all death and destruction, and this part of the prophetic role is based firmly in a personal knowledge of God and God's work in our lives and our history.

You see Isaiah offering hope and consolation toward the end: after he's talked about the whole vine of Israel being cut off, then he talks about a shoot growing out of the stump.

Ezekiel has all these scary prophecies about the destruction of the Temple and God's presence leaving, but then he talks about God calling him to preach to the valley of the dry bones, representative of the people who are all dried up and dead due to lack of hope. Ezekiel is to prophesy to them and the flesh returns, and God says through him, "I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

Jeremiah, the "weeping prophet," still manages to talk about hope for the remnant, reminds the people that God gives them a hope and a future, and that they are to plant trees even in exile, to live for the fullest possible goodness of even that culture that exiled them.

And then in the book of Revelation, when John is having this prophetic vision of apocalyptic death and destruction, his vision ends with a tree of life with a river flowing from it.

(Notice how all of these are very physical, land-based metaphors: a vine with a living shoot, being placed on our own soil, planting orchards as a sign of our active hope for a good future, a tree and a river symbolizing life. It seems like God's words to the prophets are very physical, connecting the health of the community with the land.)

The role of the prophet is not just to tell us what's wrong with the world, but also to give us an alternative vision for the future. We may be in a not-so-good-looking place right now, but God is with us! We can move forward, secure in the knowledge that God has been at work in our lives and community, and will continue to be at work in bringing forth good fruit in our futures, like the young couple who worked with the landowner.

Alright, so the prophetic role has to do with bringing hope. But what exactly is hope?

What is Hope?

That brings us to our second topic: What is hope? Is it wishful thinking, which we should ignore because it's irrational? Is it a personality trait like optimism, and some people have it while other people just don't? Is it a noun—something we have? Or a verb—something we do?

To help us out with some of this, I'll note that psychologists have created a whole hope theory. Basically what it says is that hope consists of having a **goal**, and being able to think about **steps** we can take to get there, and imagine ourselves having the **motivation** or

sense of agency to move in that direction. Psychologists think of hope as a cognitive experience, something we do rationally. We calculate our chances of attaining a goal, we search around inside ourselves and look back at our past history and decide whether we'll have the motivational energy to get ourselves from where we are to where we want to be, and based on that thought process, we decide if we're going to hope or not.

Philosophers have noticed, however, that hope is rarely so systematic and rational. Why do people hope in things that aren't very likely to happen? Why do we hope to beat the odds if we're sick with a terminal disease? Why do we root for the underdog? It seems that hope is not exactly based on a high probability or likelihood of our desired outcome. When we know the reality of a situation, if there's even a glimmer of a chance that the thing we hope for will come true, we sometimes choose to focus on that possibility, knowing full well that it may not happen. It probably won't happen. But we choose to hope that it will. It's not hope if there's no chance of it happening—that's **wishful thinking**. Nor is it hope if it definitely will happen—that's **certainty**.

I'll mention the words for hope used in the Bible, because this gives us a broader sense of what hope is.

There are several words in the Hebrew Bible that we translate "hope," since there is a range of meaning to the English word and to the Hebrew words. The two that seem most relevant are *yachal/tohelet* and *qavah/tiqvah* (the verb and noun forms).

Qavah/tiqvah refers to hope that one has within the timespan of a human life, and has to do with the hope of a long life that is fulfilling and lived ethically, in right relationship.

Yachal/tohelet requires an object that one is waiting for or expecting—usually God. This word has a continuous nature, and refers to waiting on God in a sustained way, with what we as Friends sometimes call "holy expectancy." This is a waiting that we do communally and over generations, putting our hope, faith, and trust in God, that God is working to bring about God's promises, even though it may be outside the scope of our lifetimes. This is the kind of hope we need for working on environmental concerns, right? This is the kind of hope we use when we practice being stewards to the seventh generation beyond us.

I won't go into a word study of the Greek word used for hope in the Christian Testament, *elpis*, but if you want to know more later I am happy to talk to you about it—but the main point is that the translators of the Hebrew Bible into Greek used *elpis* to mean this expectant longing and waiting (*yachal/tohelet*), and the authors of the Christian Testament took up this meaning, even though it is not the same meaning of the term as the culture around them. But just as in English, the Greek language didn't have a word to express this

deep and long-term hoping that we find in the Hebrew Scriptures and the early Christian community.

Joanna Macy says that hope is a **practice**, an intention. It's a choice we make in full knowledge of reality. We don't have to have optimism that the thing we hope for will occur, but we do have to continually open ourselves to the possibility that the hoped for thing will come into being, and we start moving in that direction, be our steps ever so small.

Why don't we hope sometimes? I think we don't hope because it's too painful, letting all that hope in, and day after day seeing that it doesn't happen. Continuing to practice hope in the face of day after day of failure is hard work, and I think that's why we **tell each other stories**. Stories help us imagine a different world. We can see ourselves moving around in that world, and this vision helps us to see what it would take to move in the direction of that place.

Hope is for the future, but I think it requires an **orientation toward the past**, too. We have to have a sense that we've been able to move in a positive direction and accomplish goals in the past, so this gives us a measure of assurance that we can do so again. So telling our stories, which are by necessity about things that happened in the past, helps us see how to hope for the future.

When we remember Quakers from history who have done great things, we're creating a foundation for our hope.

When we read the Bible, we know God has done good things in the past so we can have faith that God will do similar things in the future.

And it also helps to have more modern examples, to hear stories of those in our world today who are moving in the direction of what we hope.

Hope and the Environment

So, to get to the third topic: applying hope to the current environmental situation. When I look at the whole scope of the environmental problems we face, sometimes I get overwhelmed and I can't see any hope. I can't see the steps I can take from where I am to the world I imagine, the world where we're good Christian stewards, treating creation with respect and care. I need to see some **examples** of how people are working on this. I need to hear their stories so I can see some of the steps I can take in that direction, too, because sometimes it seems like we're so far into overconsumption and exploitation of people and resources that it's hard to have hope that people would actually live any differently.

There's the example of your very own San Francisco. The city decided that they want the city to have zero waste by the year 2020, and they're well on their way to meeting that goal. You have curbside composting, and new businesses have sprouted up that refurbish or recycle electronic components, and that recycle all kinds of plastic and make it into new high-grade plastic. Garbage collectors are a dignified part of the community, helping the community meet their goal. The thing that stands out to me from your example is that you're seeing trash as waste anymore, but as a resource, and they want to keep that resource in their community by continuing to use it, rather than shipping it out and burying it. Does that bring up the parable of the talents for anyone else?

Yesterday I talked about watershed discipleship, and there are many examples of people practicing watershed discipleship with their congregations. Many congregations are working on retrofitting their buildings to be more energy efficient, working on making their groundskeeping practices more eco-friendly, and implementing things such as community garden and garden sharing programs to help feed their communities, and get their communities involved in learning how to produce their own food. A growing number of congregations and denominations are divesting their financial investments from fossil fuel companies and other companies that use environmentally harmful practices. A congregation in Portland called the Wilderness Way Community spends one Sunday a month at a local wildlife refuge in prayer, and has work days several times a year to help restore and care for that space. Last Earth Day, North Valley Friends partnered with Wilderness Way to plant 150 trees. North Valley has a walking trail and outdoor labyrinth that people from the community can enjoy, and connect with others and build community through spending time on the land. Congregations are engaging in activism around environmental concerns, such as a Presbyterian congregation in Portland that is working with 350.org to stop the coal terminals that were planned in Oregon and Southwest Washington. The one in Vancouver, WA was recently halted, and several in Oregon have been halted or put on hold due to community activism.

Although in some ways it feels like our little actions are not much, and what can our little changes do to fix the huge problem we see, in other ways, I think this is the best way that we can enact change. I was talking to your very own Guiseppe the other night about the activism of many in this congregation against nuclear armament, and I asked if it felt like it did any good, to go there year after year to protest. He said, "For those who gather, it brings hope that we're not alone." And this is part of the way that hope works: even though the process is long and it can at times feel like we're not accomplishing much, we are holding the space of hope for and with one another, and at times, God's Spirit breaks through in powerful ways. The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice.

Joanna Macy imagined hope like a photo in a newspaper: when we look at it through a magnifying glass, it's a series of meaningless little dots. But if we zoom out, a picture emerges. When we look at our lives close up, it can feel like we're just small little dots with no meaning. But when we look at things on a broader scale, with the whole history of humanity and our planet from a God's-eye view, we can see a heart breakingly beautiful picture emerging, and it wouldn't be the same without the dot that is you, courageously and faithfully standing in its place.

There's a quote attributed to Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." When you think about it, this is really true. So here's your group of committed, thoughtful people, joining with other similar groups from all over the country and the world, based in our faith of what God has done in us and through us in the past, looking toward the future with hope.

Conclusion

To sum up: the role of the prophet is to cast a vision of the future, a vision that contains the brutal reality we're in, but that also grounds us in a how God has worked in the past in order to give us hope for the future. Hope is a choice that we make, and we make it daily, like a spiritual practice, choosing to see reality and also choosing to take steps in the direction of our hoped-for goal. And hope is often based in the sharing of our stories. When we hear stories of others who have taken steps toward the same goals, we, too, find we have the motivation to continue along the path. I heard that you have recently started to re-emphasize environmental concerns, and so I hope that this series this weekend has encouraged you to really get on board with what they are suggesting. I hope it helps you feel the motivation to take another step, and another, toward stewarding and co-creating the vineyard with God.

Each of us gets to choose which kind of tenant we're going to be. Are we going to be the ones who shut down and violently reject all hope, choosing to act out of fear, or are we going to be the ones that open up vulnerably to what we don't know, working alongside the Master Vintner together and sharing our stories?

I leave you with this quote from Dorothy Day: "People say, what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time."