

The United Church of Moscow
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Storage Wars
Matthew 21:33-46 CEB

The kingdom is given to those who produce fruit not for the sake of power but for the sake of others.

Kingdom

In my hometown in the Texas Panhandle, there used to be a meat-processing plant. It was a huge facility that produced lots of jobs, lowered the price of beef for our region, and improved our local economy tremendously.

But in 2013, due to a prolonged drought in the region, the plant closed and our community felt the impact. Many people had to leave town to find work, a lot of people were faced with uncertain futures, the price of beef skyrocketed, and they estimated that the county's economy took a \$1.1 Billion dollar loss (<https://www.beefmagazine.com/cattle-pricing/cargill-plant-closing-drives-collapse-in-futures>)

This plant was a huge benefit to our community that improved the lives and well-being of a significant portion of our population, and without it, real people felt the impact.

This is similar to the role that vineyards play in Jesus's first-century Palestinian context. The presence of a vineyard in a community provided a sense of stability and security. It provided job opportunities and created future sustainability for a community. Wine was a crucial part of their daily lives because often wine was safer to drink than unpurified water; so access to wine was of utmost importance to people.

It was also a source of food for the poorest in the community, because they were allowed to come and pick up the leftovers from the fields. The people often held celebrations to commemorate the harvest time. Vineyards and the wine they produced were communal blessings for everyone.

Without the vineyard, without direct access to its production, the community would suffer.

Perhaps this is why Jesus often compares the kingdom of God to a vineyard. Throughout his ministry, Jesus constantly refers to the "Kingdom of God" or the "Kingdom of the heavens."

He even instructs the people to pray that the “Kingdom of God” would be established on earth as it is in the heavens.

For Jesus, the Kingdom of God on earth seems to be wherever the ways of God are lived out in a way that leads to liberation, love, justice, peace, and the flourishing of all creation. For Jesus, the “Kingdom” becomes about the ways in which our commitment to God impacts our relationships with the world around us. This is why some prefer to call it the “upside down kingdom of God,” reminding people that it is countercultural to walk in the ways of Jesus in the midst of living in an earthly empire. Or they use the phrase, “kin-dom,” emphasizing the familial and communal relationship at stake within God’s kingdom on earth.

The kingdom of God is like a vineyard, Jesus says. So, seeing the benefit that vineyards, like the kingdom of God, have for the community, in our parable today, someone buys the land in a community and begins to cultivate it, building a tower to guard against intruders, and begins to imagine this future for the community. What goodness could this vineyard produce for the people here?

Stewards

But the landowner has to take a trip and go away for a little while, but he intends to come back and check on the progress and make sure the produce is distributed and used wisely at harvest time.

So, he hires tenants to take care of the vineyard. You can imagine what the interview process was like: he casts the vision of his vineyard benefitting the whole community, shows them the posters that advertise how many jobs this will bring to the area, how it will help even the poorest among them, and demonstrates how the vineyard will lower the cost of wine for everyone and give them more direct access to.

The landowner instructs his tenants, casts a vision for them, in the same way that Jesus has instructed us and cast a vision for life in the kingdom of God on earth. A life of producing fruit; the fruit of pursuing liberation for the oppressed, love of neighbor, justice for all people, peace on earth, and the flourishing of all creation. This is the vision that we, the tenants of God’s kingdom, have been given to steward while Jesus in the flesh is away.

The tenants of this vineyard in Matthew 21 buy into the vision, so much so that they become the stewards of it. **While the owner is away, they are in charge of stewarding the vision and producing fruit that will benefit the whole community.**

Owners

But a funny thing starts to happen when the owner has been gone for a while - the stewards start to mistake their position and begin to believe the fruit of the vineyard is theirs for the taking, and that the vineyard itself belongs to them.

After all, they have been the ones in the field hard at work, right? They are the ones who have put in the time, sweat, and energy to produce the fruit. And where is the landowner, anyway? Off on some exotic vacation no doubt while we do all the work.

And they know that the vineyard owner has big plans for this fruit and a vision for how it will impact the community. But, this fruit sure looks good. And they start to think, "It would be nice to have it for myself, for my family, for my friends. I could get rich off this fruit and sell it to others. I could raise my social status. I could become the owner."

But when you start to believe that you are owed the goodness of the vineyard, that you can store it and hoard it and use it for yourself. You start to resemble a scene from the long-running reality television series, "Storage Wars." Perhaps you've seen it:

(<https://www.aetv.com/shows/storage-wars>)

Storage units go untouched and unused for an extended period of time and so the storage facilities put the entirety of the unit's contents up for auction. And people from all over come to bid on these storage units, believing that there is some hidden treasure in each of them that they can get rich off of. And they get into bidding wars, and they backstab one another, and make deals and alliances behind one another's backs, all for the chance to get rich off of someone else's property.

How often, like the stewards of the vineyard, do we see the good fruit of God's Kingdom and decide to hoard it for ourselves? We experience God's truth, beauty, wisdom, peace, justice, and love, and decide that it would be better kept for ourselves? That we should get to decide who becomes recipients of the kingdom's fruit.

Because there are a few of our neighbors that we would be okay with having less than us. Because there are some politicians who shouldn't get to experience God's peace. Because liberation should only apply to those we agree with. And love is best spent on those who reciprocate it.

And we start to look around at the fruit of God's kingdom and believe that its benefit is for our comfort, our stability, and those we deem worthy enough.

But when you start to believe that the vineyard and its goodness belongs to you, you start to fight over fruit that isn't yours.

Violence

The stewards turn to violence. To committing atrocities against their fellow human beings. To devaluing the lives of their neighbors for the sake of themselves. They beat and kill and stone and run out of town any person who would take the fruit of the vineyard.

But I wonder, do you think the violence will stop when there are no longer any servants to destroy?

I imagine that at some point, they will turn toward each other and begin to destroy one another. Their desire for power and control over land and produce that is not theirs, will prove insatiable. And all of a sudden, the vineyard that was once a place of promise has become a place of desolation.

And this is exactly what Jesus reminds the people of here. V. 43 - **“God's kingdom will be taken away from you and will be given to a people who produce its fruit.” - Matthew 21:43**

In the upside-down “kin-dom” of God that seeks to benefit the flourishing of all people, there is no room for those who use, abuse, and hoard God’s goodness. There is no space for selfishness, greed, or violence against one another. God’s kingdom moves towards those who understand that the kingdom was never theirs to begin with, that it always belonged to God. That it was always for the sake of the whole community. That our role has, and always will be, stewardship of God’s kingdom blessings.

And so, for the stewards, who misunderstand their role in the vineyard, the benefits of it will be taken away and given to those who know how to produce its fruit.

So often, this is the story that we play out time and time again. But Jesus demonstrates another way...

Humility

Philippians 3:3-8 NRSV

Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

Jesus, who has every right to take the fruit of the kingdom for himself, for his own glory, for his own power, chose to give it up for the sake of others. Jesus bought into the vision of the kingdom of God on earth - that the fruit produced in God's kingdom is for the sake of others.

This is why Jesus is called the cornerstone! The example to follow - because if there was ever a steward who had the right to take the fruit of the vineyard for himself, it would have been Jesus. And yet, he doesn't. He gives up the benefits of the vineyard for the sake of others, he "empties himself" of selfishness and greed and vanity. He becomes humble; does not consider equality with God, the vineyard's owner, to be something he should grasp for.

This is the cornerstone, the foundation of God's Kingdom - that even the greatest among us does not consider themselves more than a steward of God's communal goodness.

For the sake of others

There are days when it can feel like God has abandoned us - like maybe we really are all on our own. And maybe we should start taking matters into our own hands.

Maybe we should start to play the game that everyone else seems to be playing: we should do what we can to get ahead, to make our lives comfortable, to acquire wealth and security, to do whatever makes us feel good. Because God isn't really paying attention, right?

But the kingdom and its goodness has been given to you, to steward for the benefit of others.

May you reject playing the game of storage wars, and instead embrace faithful stewardship.

Discussion Questions:

1. What organizations or groups are considered communal blessings to our community?
2. Do you think Christians, or our church in particular, is considered a communal blessing by our neighbors? Why or why not?
3. In what ways can we share the goodness of God's "kin-dom" with others?