

So apparently if I were quite literally planted in a garden, I would be a watermelon. Just go with me here, because it's been a really weird week when it comes to, well...*fruit*. For the last year or so, we've been doing something with the school kids to help them center themselves, we've aimed to give them one thing a month to focus on in order to create a school environment that is warm and caring and attentive to one another. So, each month, we focus on one of the *fruits of the Spirit*—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. But here's the thing, those are a lot of things to remember, so we've endeavored to find lots of different ways to help those fruits stick in their brain.

We've had Bluetooth speaker dance parties. There is a *ridiculous* song to help you remember the fruits of the Spirit, and so I have blared that through the sanctuary and the kids have flossed in the aisles and danced. During Covid, Linda, Kevin, and I sang together with puppets and accents and weird fruit moves...do not ask me to imitate a Georgia peach...it's just embarrassing. However, we upped the embarrassing ante this past week, because now that we can't sing in chapel what are you supposed to do? What you're supposed to do, apparently, is throw on the most insane fruit costumes ever, dress up kind of ala the California Raisins and teach the kids how to hand jive in rhythm to repeating the fruits of the Spirit. Which is

how I found myself on Wednesday morning dressed up like a watermelon, dancing like a fool next to a bunch of grapes (Linda) and a banana (Kevin).



All this to say that, sometimes, the kingdom of God looks really, really weird ya'll but, as the world changes around us and as circumstances evolve, we have to get creative when it comes to how we're cultivating that kingdom, how we're cultivating that vineyard, how we're growing or not growing where we're planted. Sometimes it requires costumes, sometimes it requires dance parties, sometimes well, sometimes it requires things you just never in a million years anticipated, and that is simply...life in God's vineyard.

From where we stand in our gospel, life in God's vineyard is currently still unbelievably tense. Our gospel picks up immediately where last week's

left off, so none of the tension has eased, if anything it just keeps ratcheting up more and more, because last week I mean, last week was bad enough. Jesus facing down the Chief Priests and telling them that tax collectors and prostitutes would be going into the kingdom of God ahead of them, because even those people seem like “sinners,” they at least have gotten the message Jesus and John have been trying to convey. Jesus tells the Chief Priests that they’ve basically just turned into a bunch of yes men, who idly give God a little lip service of yes, yes, we hear you, care for the widow, the orphan, the alien, yes, yes, we hear you, love our neighbor, yes, yes, we hear you, strive for justice and weed out oppression, but then they don’t really care about any of it. The only thing they care about is lining their own pockets with money and power in service to the empire that lets them simply keep existing. But the thing is, as rough of a message as that is to hear, Jesus at least still tells them that they’re getting into the kingdom of God, they just aren’t getting there first.

If you’re the disciples, you probably want to tug on the arm of Jesus’ robe and be like, “Dude, ok, message received. You turned over the tables and you told them that they’ve gotten basically everything wrong, but umm look at the guards and the crowds and well, this could go really south, really quickly so maybe let’s wrap this up and skedaddle.” And then there’s Jesus

who's like, no, no, I have a few more things to say. There's this scene in Hamilton where Aaron Burr and Hamilton are arguing their first court case together and Hamilton is just going on and on and on, and he finally gets to his point and Burr is like, "That's all you had to say, Hamilton, sit down," and within about two seconds, Hamilton pops back up and says, "One more thing!" And that's Jesus here, he's gotten his point across, *heavily*, but there's always just that one more thing...

Jesus continues the parable train, this time talking in words that would have sounded very familiar to the authorities and the crowds. He starts talking about a vineyard being deeply cultivated and lovingly planted, and everyone would have had echoes of our first lesson in their head. These were Jewish people who knew their scripture, and so hearing about this lovingly built vineyard, there has to be that uh oh instinct because they know how it usually goes when God plants a vineyard with such beautiful and loving expectations. Jesus changes the narrative a bit, it's no longer about the kind of fruit that the vineyard is producing, it's about how the people who have been given the vineyard to tend, view it. They've lost their sense of who really owns this vineyard, who is really in charge of it, who is really owed the benefits of the harvest. They work and plant and tend this vineyard knowing full well that it is not their own, but the second that that

reality is placed before them, they lash out with violence and hatred, because they will not have this vineyard taken away from them. It's *theirs*, to do with what they will. Who cares what the vineyard owner thinks.

The crowds follow Jesus' thinking here. When he asks what the owner will do with these wicked tenants, they're ready to respond with pitchforks and tantrums. The owner will destroy those miserable wretches! The owner will find someone else to do the right thing! And you just have to imagine Jesus sighing and shaking his head like, ya'll don't realize what I'm saying, I mean you get it, but do you see that I'm saying this *to you*? So now, he really lays it down. Now it isn't just that there will be others that will go into the kingdom ahead of the Chief Priests and authorities, now it's that the kingdom itself will be taken away from them, because they haven't treated it, tended it, cultivated it in the ways they were supposed to, so it's not theirs anymore. It has to be handed over to people who will produce fruits of the kingdom, not fruits of wealth, greed, empire, and power.

It'd be so much easier to take a step back from this parable and be like, well this was Jesus talking to *them*. This was a message for the Chief Priests and aren't most parables more metaphorical anyway, so maybe we can just move it along. But we can't. Because the reality is, here we sit in God's vineyard. Here we sit in God's kingdom. The vineyard, the kingdom

has been placed in our hands for tending, and this parable forces us to take a hard look at what fruits we've been producing, at how well *or not well* we have been cultivating what has been handed to us. For as much as we hate to admit it, this parable drives home the reality that for as much as we want to think that we are the those who have been handed the kingdom for good and safe keeping, far too often the way in which we operate in the world is much more aligned with how the Chief Priests treated the kingdom which was placed in their care, tilling the ground to produce what they thought was most beneficial, rather than being attentive to the fruit God was calling them to produce. We want to say that we've built our world off of the cornerstone of Christ, that that is our basis for all that we do, and yet, I fear that more often than not we build from our own desires and needs and see where Christ might fit in here or there, where we can kind of squeeze him in between the cracks when it's convenient, rather than building from and around Christ.

Because, if we're building around Christ, if we're producing those fruits, then we have to confront the fact that for far too long we have let our vineyard produce hatred. And not just run of the mill, shake it off, oh I hate them kind of hate, but deep seated, unrelenting, keeps you trapped in its grips hate. We have picked and chosen where we sow love and made

adamantly sure that there are some of our siblings that are planted as far from love and grace as is humanly possible. We have sown disdain and prejudice and wanton disregard for our neighbor at every turn sometimes simply because it's convenient and other times because we legitimately do not feel that they are deserving of anything other than pain.

We, like the Chief Priests, have sown the vineyard with selfish greed that seeks only to look out for number one, for our own needs, and if it hurts others in the process, well tough, they simply haven't worked hard enough or done the right things to get where they need to be. We have driven ourselves to an individualistic frenzy that thinks that the only thing which matters is our corner of the vineyard and who cares what's happening a few rows of crops over. We think we don't need each other. That we can keep our focus solely on ourselves, despite Christ's call to love one another as he has loved us, despite Christ's call to care for one another like lost sheep.

Honestly, we've tended this vineyard with blatant disregard for the vineyard itself, viewing creation as something to be dominated or taken advantage of, rather than cultivated, appreciated, and cared for. The world is there for our taking and who cares what happens to the earth in the process of us getting what we need.

We need better fruits. We need better tending. We need hearts willing to cultivate what Christ has called us to, rather than just making Christ fit in where convenient and where it's not messy and where it doesn't mess with our own agenda. The kingdom of God is in our hands, it has been entrusted to us, for safe keeping and for loving care, whether we're in that vineyard dressed like a watermelon, a bunch of grapes, or a banana. It's time that we took a good, hard look around our fields. What are we producing? What do we want to produce? Do we want to keep sowing hate and fear and angst? Or are we ready to blast the music of a fruits of the Spirit dance party and start sowing with love, peace, and joy? **AMEN!!!**