

Tending the Vineyard
19 Pentecost; October 4, 2026
Saint John's Episcopal Church
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matt 21:33-46

Our Gospel reading is a parable of judgment. And the interpretation is not hard.

The landowner is God. The bad tenants are the chief priests and the Pharisees, as they themselves recognize in our reading. God has repeatedly called them to do right through a series of prophets. Now God has sent his son, Jesus, with yet another warning. But, in a final act of folly, the religious leadership will kill the son. That will not work out well for them. Judgment.

I confess that I do not love parables of judgment. When I read them, my first reaction is a little like when I am driving down the highway and see someone pulled over by the police. I am sorry for the person getting the ticket. And, I think to myself, better them than me.

That's not a generous attitude on the roads. It is even less appropriate when reading Jesus' parables. Always our question should be, not what was Christ saying to them, but what is Christ saying to us? That is true for this morning's parable of judgment.

Unfortunately, that interpretation is no harder than what the parable meant for the chief priest and Pharisees, particularly on this last Sunday of Creation Season. The landowner is still God. The vineyard is all of creation. And we, who were created as stewards of creation on God's behalf, we are the tenants.

God has sent us a series of messengers clarifying our responsibility as tenants of God's vineyard. Prophets in our own time like our own former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry or Pope Francis, particularly in his encyclical *Laudato Si* on the environment, or our very own Margaret Bullitt-Jonas.

But we can get the message in other ways too. Our Psalm reminds us that creation itself can declare to us the glory of God and show us God's handiwork. Creation can speak just as clearly to us of the folly of our ways.

This week I was reading a book about Canadian forests. According to Forest Ecologist Suzanne Simard, our warming climate has led to an explosion in the population of several species of beetle that prey on trees. As a result, millions of acres in Canada have been deforested, which has contributed to the particularly catastrophic fires of the last few years.¹ Those fires have compromised air quality, including here in western Massachusetts. That's a message.

The question our parable poses to us is, how will we respond to the messages we are receiving about our stewardship of God's vineyard? So far, the answer is, a lot like the tenants in our parable, which is not good news.

But we do have models in our tradition of better ways to live as healthy and faithful parts of God's creation. Today we commemorate the most famous of them all: Saint Francis of Assisi. Today is the 800th anniversary of Francis' death.

Francis was not a theologian, and he didn't write much. Francis' most famous work is a hymn usually called the Canticle of Brother Sun. We'll sing an adaptation of Francis' hymn at the end of our service this morning.

In the original, Francis praises God through Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brothers Wind and Air, Sister Water, Brother Fire, and Sister Earth. Our hymn omits the kinship language, but is true to Francis' spirit when it begins, "All creatures of our God and king, lift up your voices, let us sing, alleluia, alleluia!" Ideally, we join all of creation in praising God.

Francis' sense of kinship with all of creation shaped his life in ways large and small, as many stories indicate.

The Francis story I have chosen for this morning is the Wolf of Gubbio. A huge wolf was terrifying the little town of Gubbio, eating livestock and killing human beings. Understandably, the townspeople decided to kill the wolf, if they could.

That's when Francis showed up. Francis proposed a different solution. Francis wanted to make peace with the wolf. So, Francis went to meet the

¹ Simard, *When the Forest Breathes: Renewal and Resilience in the Natural World*, 2026, page 38-39. The insects she names are the mountain pine beetle, the spruce-bark beetle, the Douglas-fir bark beetle, and the western spruce budworm.

wolf. When he did, the wolf charged. But Francis made the sign of the cross, and the wolf immediately laid down at Francis' feet.

Francis then addressed the wolf. "Brother Wolf, I want to make peace between you and [the people of Gubbio], so that they will not be harmed by you anymore and, after they have forgiven you all your past crimes, neither men nor dogs will pursue you anymore." It will be to everyone's advantage.

The townspeople agreed to feed the wolf every day, and the wolf agreed not to hurt any animals or people. The wolf signaled its agreement by nodding its head.²

That story sounds a lot like the kind of legend that grew up around Francis in the years after his death. But it seems to have at least a kernel of historical fact. A few decades ago, excavators found a skeleton of a wolf buried beneath the Franciscan Church at Gubbio.³

I love this story for what it says about the possibilities for the kind of relationship we can have with the natural world around us. Francis viewed the man-eating wolf as his brother. And Francis assumed that the townspeople and the wolf could live together in a mutually beneficial relationship.

That was Saint Francis, and everyone knows Francis was a little odd. I am not going to cultivate a close and personal relationship with a wolf or any other animal that could kill me. But we can follow Francis' example in our own way.

Suzanne Simard, the Forest Ecologist I mentioned earlier, researches the sources of forest resilience. She wants to know more about how forests recover after destructive events like wildfires, but also like logging. Her hope is to discover ways to minimize the long-term damage to forests caused by our need for forest products. I see her as a modern Francis trying to create a mutually beneficial peace between human beings and the rest of God's creation.

² St. Francis of Assisi Omnibus of Sources, 1348-1351, quotation from 1349

³ St. Francis of Assisi Omnibus of Sources, 1880, note

But we don't have to look to other countries or to professional ecologists for examples of people making peace with nature. Here at Saint John's, Kay and others have been developing a pollinator garden to help the local bee population. Our hope is to expand the garden and put up educational signs to spread the word.

After this service, we'll bless some of the animals we love. That's another way of sharing God's love with the non-human creation around us.

If enough of us can take up the challenge, in our own ways and in our own contexts, we could even rewrite the ending to our parable of judgment.

Imagine the son coming to the vineyard and finding, not a group of murderous thugs, but thriving grape vines in a beautiful setting tended by diligent stewards of the land. Imagine the tenants welcoming the son warmly, and eagerly showing him the fruits of their labor. That evening they crack open a few bottles of homemade wine and enjoy a feast together, a feast that resembles the wedding banquet we are promised at the end of the age.

That's the ending of our story that we hope for. That's the ending God wants for us. That's the ending that Christ helps us to get to.

May we follow the way of Christ and the example of Saint Francis in our work as tenants and stewards of God's vineyard. In Christ's name. Amen.