

Rev. Roy Stiles
Isaiah 5:1-7
Philippians 4:6-9
Matthew 21:33-43

27TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
October 1-2, 2011

What a beautiful setting! It's nice to see all of God's creation around you when you come to worship and give praise to God. It's my first visit here to celebrate the liturgy. I've been here several times before for meetings or whatever, but my first time to celebrate the liturgy. I'm happy to be here, and hope that everything will go well.

One of my connections a long time ago with Epiphany that some of you would appreciate is that six months before Fr. Richard Fowler – he was the first co-pastor of Epiphany – I stayed with him the last six months of his life at St. Francis of Rome where he had been pastor. He had become so disabled at that point that he needed someone to be there so I was appointed for those six months by the Archbishop to be administrator. That was a wonderful experience I just say in passing being with him during those six months. He wasn't able to get out very much, but we did on occasion go out and he really enjoyed that. It was evident how many people loved him so much they wanted to come and see him. Sometimes he wasn't able to see them, because he just wasn't up to it. So I thought I would throw that out to you as a little remembrance of Fr. Richard Fowler who was co-pastor with Fr. Jim Flynn, as many of you know.

For the last few days, for reasons I don't fully understand, I've been thinking about Pope John Paul the First. Remember him? Well you would have to be at least 33 or so, because just this past Wednesday was the 33rd anniversary of his death. What was unusual about him, among many things, is that he was pope for only 33 days. I'll never forget. I was in Jamestown at that time as pastor, and this lady called me early in the morning and she said, "The Pope is dead!" And I said, "That's a month ago that he died." She said, "I mean the one that's pope now is dead after 33 days." So it was quite a shock. But to this pope, I've been reading about him recently because there was mention of his 33rd anniversary of death last Wednesday.

He was the first pope that had a double name, so that might give you a clue as to who he was to have the courage to pick as his name a double name – John Paul.

He's been described as the smiling pope. I've never seen a picture of him or photo where he was not smiling. Some said that he had the smile of God. He is described as a gentle spirit of openness and informality, who began to lighten up a decade of ecclesial doom. And they may have added gloom. But his best description was that he was a person of serene exuberance. Can you imagine such an oxymoron? Serene exuberance. And if you see him on film, you will know exactly what it means. A person that was outstanding! He had an aversion to scripts written out, prepared, and this raised hackles among the brass of the Vatican, but it was a hit with the general masses.

Let me mention this one other thing about him. The most memorable thing for me in studying him just recently was his encounter that he had at one of his papal audiences in the Nervi Hall with a boy, a middle school boy, who was among the choir boys of Malta who were visiting in the Vatican at that time. The Pope gave an invitation and acknowledged the choir boys of Malta and invited one to come forth. This one bolted from his group and came immediately up to the Pope's chair and stood next to him. They had a marvelous three minute dialogue, exchange, which was animated on both parts. It was in Italian, unfortunately, but there is an English transcript of what was said. I won't go into that, but a beautiful, beautiful thing. It's on YouTube if you want to see it. John Paul I with the English transcription. Beautiful, just amazing!

Well maybe I have been thinking of Pope John Paul I because as we reflect today on our Sunday scriptures, especially our passage from Isaiah and chapter 21 of Matthew, he among all people arises in my mind and in my view as one of the most authentic, one of the most humble, one of the most credible tenants ever who has spaded and worked in the garden and in the vineyard of God. He is just impressive. He had the humility and the authenticity to be who he was. And that's the focus, as we already know, of this Sunday's scripture; the two words the "vineyard" and the "tenants." Isaiah paints a very beautiful picture of his friend who had a vineyard, and we know the story already. But the vineyard didn't turn out right. It produced wild grapes instead of nice, fresh, juicy ones. And it says the vineyard of God is the house of Israel. That's the vineyard. The house of Israel of old, and the owner is disappointed that it didn't produce what it was supposed to. So he does an unusual thing. He just lets it fall into ruin, and as a result, the vineyard is destroyed.

The gospel passage about another vineyard has a quite different conclusion. It's spoken of as a parable, or even better an allegory, and there is a lack of faithfulness on the part of the tenants in the vineyard. The result here is that the vineyard will

be entrusted to new tenants. The point of both of these is that there is a need for the vineyard to bear fruit. There is a necessity for the leadership to cultivate the vineyard so that it will. I'll just mention in passing an alternate interpretation of this parable, because it's kind of interesting, and that is the tenants described in the parable maybe have become weary of being without land and without power. So they do what they have to do. They do away with all of the employees and the owner of the vineyard and the son to gain control of that land. Now that interpretation has quite a different conclusion, and that is the parable becomes a commentary for the futility of violence in accomplishing ownership or leadership in the vineyard.

Let's move on then to our reflections for today as was provided to me by our liturgy team and planning team for Epiphany. It was indicated in their recommendations and suggestions that our focus and our reflection today is to see ourselves as God's vineyard. To ask, as we have already heard, if we are faithfully tending what God has planted in each one of us or in our family here or in our larger community. Are we tending this vineyard that God has placed in our charge? Are we willing, they ask, to trust the Spirit's presence in all situations of our lives, even those that are very difficult and perhaps seem impossible? Are we willing to let that Spirit come forth? And, very important, continuing the theme that we're working on during this fall of 2011, are we and can we stretch beyond the familiar? That's a tough one. Can we stretch beyond the familiar by being open to God's working in especially unexpected ways in our lives? Do I believe that God can bring forth good fruit in the most surprising ways in my vineyard, regardless of the situations that may be at hand? And we recall last Sunday's reading, God's ways are not our ways.

As I received these notes and these reflections on the part of the worship and liturgy committee, I was a little taken aback. I was a little apprehensive whether all these thoughts and ideas could be fit and appropriate and be reconciled with our scripture readings today. I became a little nervous and wondered is this going to cramp my creativity. Maybe you can see it didn't. But upon further thought and reflection, I realized and I concluded that all this could work. I'm going to make it work, because we are, in fact, God's vineyard as the new Israel, the continuation, not new in the sense of new, but the continuation of God's ancient and original plan that was first and historically brought to our father Abraham in the land of the Caldeese.

Second, we're called, each and every one of us and this community, is called to take care of all that God has planted in us. It's a calling from God. It's not just

what we chose or chose not to do. We're laboring as we mature, and hopefully we're always doing that, to trust the Spirit's presence in the most difficult situations. The Spirit is there to lift up, to guide, to inspire, to push. And we in fact can stretch beyond the familiar. Yes we can. We can stretch beyond the familiar in our lives and in God's working if we trust in God and God's Spirit and that power that is within us. Yes we can. We can do it, and we can believe that God can bring forth good fruit that we might at one point think is unimaginable.

How do I know all this? Well, because I can attest to it! Not only from my own experience, but from the experiences of others I've known in my lifetime. Let me give you a single example in my own experience. And that is back in the 1970's and early 80's, I was assigned to the missions we called them of southern Kentucky. We refer to missions as places where Catholics are few and far between. I was assigned to Jamestown in Russell County and Albany in Clinton County and Columbia in Adair County. The funny part is that I grew up in Bardstown. I grew up where about everybody I knew was Catholic, and we didn't really exchange that much with those *protestants* or other that weren't of our leaning. We went to the Catholic school, and they went to the public school – a bad place...we thought. And we didn't have much exchange, so you can imagine my going down to this area never really having been exposed to much of that before. The population down there was one-half of 1% Catholic in those counties. That means that one out of every 200 people that you might run into was Catholic. The others were a combination of all kinds.

So I was no longer in power. I mean I had to do something! But believe it or not, I wasn't afraid. I was not afraid. I don't know why. I guess it was because God's power and the Spirit were within me. I saw it as a challenge. I saw it as something I had never been involved in before. I was willing and able to stretch beyond what I was familiar with. I knew that I would have to adjust. I knew that I would have to learn. I knew that I would have to learn to be more open, to accept also and to be proud of who I was. And not to deny my own background and roots and all of those things. I knew too that my larger community, that is in that area, not only Catholic but the whole community in particular, I knew that they needed to dispel a lot of myths that they believed about Catholics. Incredible! Absolutely incredible myths! And I thought they can't get away with that. So I knew that was also part of my calling in going there.

So the result is, I changed. The community changed. We had a wonderful relationship in the whole community. We all came to a better appreciation and understanding and acceptance of one another. As it turned out, these were the

happiest years of my life. You wouldn't expect that, but that's what it was, and they continue to be.

I could have been turned in. I could have been defensive. I could have been closed. But with the Spirit's guidance and the power of God, it all worked, and it worked in a beautiful way.

So let's conclude this. You have your own experiences. You know of other people's experiences that have stretched beyond the familiar. Reflect on those, either now or as you go through this week. Today is an opportunity that the holy scripture and God places before us, and one that can make our lives more fulfilling and more fulfilled. Let's take that with us today.