

Homily for Sunday, October 4, 2026



For the third week in a row, Jesus tells us a parable that is set in a vineyard. Vineyards are places where both labour and love take place. And for the second week in a row, Jesus is criticizing the religious leaders. Jesus' complaint last week was against leaders who talked a good talk

but who never lifted a finger to help another—much like the son who said he would work in the vineyard but never showed up for work.

The Church is often referred to as the Body of Christ. All organizations, all bodies, are made up of three kinds of bones: wishbones, jawbones, and backbones. The *wishbones* are people full of idea but little else. We all know people who never get their heads out of the clouds. The *jawbones* are folks who talk a good talk and keep reminding the rest of us that if *they* were in charge how much better life, around here, would be. And then you have the *backbones*, the people who roll up their sleeves and actually do the work. Dreamers, talkers, and workers. All to say, words need to be followed by action.

Getting back to the vineyard, one way of making sense of what Jesus has been telling us the last three Sundays is by making a distinction between an *allegory* and a *parable*. When a story is allegorical, it means that certain things within that story are given a specific meaning. The meaning is pinned down, and the meaning is clear. For example, in that first reading God says through Isaiah that He cleared the land, dug up the earth, fertilized it, and planted the choicest vines. God is the farmer; the vineyard is Israel. God had high hopes for Israel just as a farmer has high hopes for the crop. That's an example of an allegory. The vineyard is analogous to Israel. The allegory continues when God says, "I did all this for you. I don't know what else I could have provided you with, and yet instead of yielding good grapes, you gave me sour grapes." Israel dashed God's hope. In the world of allegory, the good grapes are supposed to be works of justice and mercy, while the bad grapes are bloodshed and the cries of the poor. Those in charge of the vineyard are the religious leaders. They heard the cry of the poor and did nothing about it. And because they care only for themselves, God will take away the vineyard from them and destroy it.

What's the problem, though, with allegories? The problem with allegories is how specific they are. They refer to someone else, in some other time, and in some other place. When we hear them, we dismiss them as having no bearing on us or on our own times. The

Biblical prophets get pushed to the backburner as people who have nothing to say to us because they lived at a time far from our own. Then we grow cynical and falsely think that the only prophets God ever sent the world must have lived only in Biblical times, never in our time.

If we stay in the world of allegory, which is not a good thing to do, we might come to some false conclusions. For instance, today's gospel starts with Jesus saying, **"Listen to another parable."** He doesn't call it an allegory but a parable. Where allegories point to specific things, parables are wide in their interpretation. Parables invite us into the big picture, God's vision for the world. If we reduce Jesus' parable to an allegory we might be tempted to say that we, the Church, are God's vineyard, God's Chosen People, and that the Jews are not. Can we use this as a proof text that the Jews had their chance caring for God's vineyard and blew it? It has been used that way, and continues to be used that way, when people falsely claim that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church. What damage we have done by taking a parable and twisting it into an allegory for our own liking.

In the history of Christian preaching and interpretation this parable has been used to flaunt our superiority as Christians and has even led to anti-Semitism. What a shame we twisted the gospel so far from its original intent. The parable we just heard is about murderous tenants who not only kill the landowner's servants but even the landowner's son. In the world of allegory, used inappropriately of course, the tenants were those nasty Jews who killed Jesus, the Son of God, the son of the landowner. In our own time, this kind of nonsense, this kind of anti-Semitism sentiment, unfortunately still exists. Just look at what happened in Belleville, Ontario recently. It's not a one-off but a mentality that has nothing to do with the gospel.

Jesus says, the Kingdom of God needs to be taken away from such people and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. Jesus moves us from a narrow allegory to a parable. Parables widen the scope; allegories narrow it.

October 4th, as you may know, is the feast of St. Francis, the most popular of all the saints. 800 years ago, on October 3rd, 1226, he died. He was only 44. He is the patron saint of ecology and animals and is often pictured surrounded by animals. Talk about someone who knew how to live in God's vineyard. He talked to the animals and referred to the sun as his brother and the moon as his sister. (If I did that, you'd take me away to the nut house).

Allegories speak to a certain group of people at a certain time in history. Parables, like Francis's very own life, speak to all people, in all times, and in all places. That's why St. Francis is as relevant now as he was 800 years ago. And that's why Jesus says the Kingdom of God is given to all people—regardless of denomination or religion—who produce the fruits of the kingdom.

You see, the vineyard of the Lord is not simply Israel, or even the Church. The vineyard could be all of creation, over which God has placed us as stewards. Unlike the tenants who thought they could own the vineyard by simply killing the owner's son, we own

nothing and never will. The various vineyards we live in--the various circles we live and move and have our being in--are all on loan to us. We own nothing, not even our own lives, but we are called to care for *everything*, as good and responsible stewards do.

In 2015, Pope Francis gave the Church and the world an important encyclical titled, *Laudato si*. It started as a document but is now a world-wide movement. *Laudato si* centers around what we do with the cry of the earth, which we continue to abuse, and what we do with the cry of the poor.

I end with this quote from Catholic theologian Luke Timothy Johnson. He wrote: ***It is not necessarily a cause for congratulations that we who have exploited the poor and the earth in order to support our needlessly, heedlessly opulent style of life, have come to our senses not because God's word has convicted us, but because we are now in danger of eliminating the sources of our pleasure. Our pillaging of the vineyard is in danger of making it a wasteland. It is, we must admit, our fear and not our faith that has moved us to make the first small steps towards ecological consciousness.***

Maybe that's why we've been in the vineyard three Sundays in a row. Imagine God saying to us, like in that first reading, ***"What more was there to do in my vineyard that I have not done in it?"*** It's a wake-up call that this kingdom of God may be taken from us and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

Fr. Phil