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Caretakers of God's co-op

by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez

Have you ever participated in a community garden? People procure a plot of land together and take on the responsibility for tending that plot so that everyone in the group can share whatever they have agreed to plant. Vegetable co-ops are especially popular in big cities where arable land is scarce and food prices often soar out of range for economically strapped families. If every member of the co-op is consistent and committed in their efforts, then all can enjoy their harvest; if each does not perform their duties regularly and well, then the crops fail, and all suffer the losses.

Today, the prophet Isaiah and the Matthean Jesus will use similar imagery to communicate God's truth to their contemporaries. The co-op in question is a vineyard, God's own vineyard. God has seen to the planting and tending of this vineyard in minute detail. From repeated references in the prophets and the psalms, we learn that God's vineyard is the people of Israel, with whom God entered into an intimate and loving relationship. In the course of their relationship, God was revealed to Israel as the creator of all, as the liberator of the enslaved, as their covenantal partner, as their guide and mentor and protector in the desert, and as the giver of a portion of this earth to call their own. At every juncture of their history, the Israelites knew the joy and security of the presence of God as well as God's total, personal engagement in each aspect of their growth and development. In caring for Israel, God had excelled. Israel, for its part, was to cooperate with God's graces and blessings and produce the good fruits of faithfulness, justice, integrity and holiness. But the Israelites had failed repeatedly as partners in God's great cooperative undertaking.

October 1, 2011
Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80
Philippians 4:6-9
Matthew 21:33-43



In one of his many efforts to call them to repentance and renewal, Isaiah sang

this ballad of his friend and his vineyard; he hoped that his love song would evoke in his listeners the desire to offer God a good harvest of faithfulness, justice and mercy. In the Gospel, the Matthean Jesus reprises the motif of the vineyard co-op in order to challenge his listeners regarding their efforts at caretaking. Jesus invited the chief priests and the elders to consider their responsibilities as leaders and caretakers, using the example of the tenant farmers. Although they should have led the way in cultivating the Lord's vineyard and in fostering a good harvest, they had not always done so.

That being said, the sacred texts are not about the failings of the Jewish leaders of the first Christian century but about our own failings in our own time. As Carl L. Schenck has explained, Isaiah's love song and Jesus' parable tell of servants who have been given much but have overreached in their desire to have it all (*The Abingdon Preaching Annual*, David N. Mosser, ed., Abingdon Press, 2004). The owner provided all they needed for a successful harvest and asked only for a share of the yield. In their greed and laziness, the servants sought to make a claim on what was not theirs. Let us hear these stories with trembling, advised Schenck.

Couldn't the same story be told regarding our care of the planet? All of creation is God's gift, a gift that we are privileged to enjoy and to preserve for future generations. But our care has not always been what it should be. Polluted resources, global warming, shrinking rainforests and overconsumption testify to our lack of stewardship. So few enjoy so much, while so many hunger for the most basic nutrition -- and this fact does little to recommend us to God. "Be aware," warns Schenck. "We are the wicked tenants."

We could become crippled with discouragement as we assess the current situation of God's good co-op and acknowledge the role we have had, both in its preservation and in its demise. Happily, Paul comes to our aid with words of encouragement. Just as he told the Philippians so long ago, Paul tells us now to give our worries over to God and pray to be better caretakers of all God's gifts. This will require frequent visits to the wellspring of God's word, where our faith will be fed, our discipleship will be challenged and our hope will be renewed.

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