

“My friend had a vineyard on a fertile hillside; he spaded it, cleared it of stones, and planted the choicest vines; within it he built a watchtower, and hewed out a wine press. Then he looked for the crop of grapes, but what it yielded was wild grapes.”

Perhaps to make this parable more relevant I could say, Our pastor had a garden, planted in fertile soil; he spaded it, cleared it of stones, and planted the choicest radishes, tomatoes, and green beans; he watched over it like a hawk and chased away squirrels. After going away to World Youth Day and handing over care of the garden to the vicar – me-, he came back, looking for his crops and saw that all that his garden yielded was weeds.

Like the vineyard owner of today’s first reading, Fr. Skluzacek asked the question, “What happened to my garden?” “What did you do?” In asking this question he skipped over the most obvious answer of “nothing” which seemed to speak for itself, so I shrugged and pleaded the fifth, because what else could I say? I watered it, but not enough evidently. I chased the squirrels away for a little while, but not well enough and eventually they ate his tomatoes. And, I didn’t pick the green beans because I do not eat green beans and so they went to seed.

As with all parables we are meant to see our own circumstances, situations, and lives in the parables that are told to us. When Fr. Skluzacek went away for World Youth Day and left me in charge his garden, I began acting like the stewards of the vineyard in today’s Gospel. I should have picked the green beans at the appointed time, watered the garden with great care, and chased away the squirrels just as he did, but I did not because I allowed other things in my life to get in the way of my duty towards the one for whom I was tending the garden. The same was true of the stewards in the vineyard of today’s Gospel; they forgot that they were tending the vineyard for someone else.

Lest anyone think me a bad gardener, or accuse me of negligence, I suspect that we all act like the stewards in today’s Gospel who were given charge of our own vineyards and then promptly forget that we are supposed to be working for someone else and thus begin working only for ourselves. We do this in our work, in our families, in our community, in our Church, and our schools. And, when we do this, the damage done is not that we leave green beans on the vine to rot or that squirrels steal tomatoes, its much worse.

We begin to realize how well we have exercised our stewardship of those people and those things which have been entrusted to our care when the time for harvest comes. That is when we find out if the vineyards left to our care produced wild or good grapes; that is when we find out if we worked for the master of the harvest or if we worked for ourselves.

We can look to our country and see what sort of fruits is being borne in our nation and in our state. Through the blood, sweat, and tears of those people who have gone before us; through the wars which were fought so that we might realize the freedom we now enjoy; through the sacrifices which our ancestors freely embraced so that their children would have a better life, good seeds were planted within the fertile soil of this nation at a great cost. We were entrusted with caring for and growing this great and noble legacy. How well have we done?

We were once a nation built upon the self-evident truth “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Yet we deny these truths and rights to so many. We join the ranks of China, Iran, North Korea, and Yeman when it comes to the top five countries that use capital punishment.ⁱ When it comes to abortion, our country joins China, Russia and Vietnam among the top four nations which murder their children.ⁱⁱ Violent crimes mar our neighborhoods, poverty and homelessness plague many families, lewd and degrading images flash across our televisions.

We were once a nation founded upon a belief in God and shaped by the morality and virtues which flow from that belief. Now Christians and people of other faiths find themselves confined to the ghettos of our Churches while a sense of right and wrong, good and evil, virtue and vice, decency and debauchery are assaulted at every opportunity. Good is called evil, and evil is celebrated as good. Tolerance is the only civic virtue which is left standing, and those deemed intolerant are silenced. Those are the bad fruits which have resulted from our stewardship of this country, these are the weeds which are choking out the good fruits which are struggling to grow.

We can look to our families and see the fruits which are being borne there as well. In the baptismal rite parents and Godparents promise God, the Church, and the child who is being baptized that they will nurture the seed of faith that their child just received. Yet only 30% of families make the most basic commitment of coming to Mass each Sunday. What sort of faith is being nurtured in their lives? What sort of fruit is being nurtured in their lives?

On the Day of Judgment those parents and Godparents will stand before God and be asked to make an accounting of the vineyard, their family, that was entrusted to them. I hope they have a better answer than shrugging their shoulders and pleading the fifth. Sports practice, weekends at the cabin, vacations, and homework are not excuses for not tending, nurturing, and growing the faith in the lives of our children and our family.

We can look to our stewardship of our Church. The blood of thousands of martyrs was once the seedbed of the faith for this world. Their witness and their blood unified this world under the banner of Christ and produced a civilization unsurpassed in beauty, morality, and splendor. Then people became greedy, they allowed their political differences to divide them, they allowed their ambitions to blind them, they allowed their preferences for liturgy to cause disunity in the body of Christ. The result of this is that during the protestant reformation and afterwards the vineyard of the Church was ripped to shreds. Today, four hundred years later, we still divide ourselves along these same fault lines, and our ability to produce good fruit for the kingdom is severely limited.

In our democratic country, we are the stewards of the legacy left to us; in our families we are the stewards of those lives entrusted to our care; in our Church we are the stewards of the Sacred Tradition handed onto us by the hands of martyrs. There will come a time when we stand before the master of the harvest and he will ask us for an accounting of our stewardship, when he will ask us to show the fruit we brought forth in his vineyard. Are we going to shrug our shoulders and plead the fifth when all we have to show for our labors are rotten green beans and weeds, or are we going to bring forth a bountiful harvest?

ⁱ Amnesty International. p. 5. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ACT50/001/2011/en/ea1b6b25-a62a-4074-927d-ba51e88df2e9/act500012011en.pdf>. Retrieved 3 June 2011

ⁱⁱ Alan Guttmacher Institute report: Sharing Responsibility Women, Society and Abortion Worldwide.