

Text: Exodus 20:1–20; Matthew 21:33–46 (with Isaiah 5:1–7)

I speak to you in the name of the father, son and holy spirit. Amen.

Good Morning! What a joyous day!. Becki, Bishop Gulick, wardens, vestries, and congregations of Grace and Piedmont, I am humbled to be able to celebrate this moment with all of you. An installation of a rector is not a celebration of a grand monarch coming to claim a kingdom, nor is it the unveiling of a corporate savior who has arrived to solve all a parish's problems. It is an intentional, sober, and joyful mutual commitment to walk together in the wilderness, to labor together in the vineyard, and to cultivate a community where the love and mercy of God are made tangible.

I will say that the readings for today – are not celebratory. When I read through them for the first time – I did call Becki and say – really? Okay - Challenge accepted!

The Decalogue in Exodus 20, and the sharp, urgent parable of the wicked tenants in Matthew 21 are heavy. Yet, if we consider closely, we find that these scriptures offer us precisely the foundation needed for faithful, transformative ministry today.

Let us first visit the base of Mount Sinai. In Exodus 20, God speaks the words of the covenant. But notice where God begins the presentation. God establishes God's relationship with the people: *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"* (Exodus 20:2).

God does not speak as a distant, abstract ruler; the Decalogue was not meant to be yet another instrument of control; instead, it is the blueprint for freedom. God speaks to a community whose bodies were recently owned by Pharaoh, whose labor was extracted through harsh punishment, and whose human dignity was systematically denied. In Egypt, Israelites learned that human beings were disposable, resources were to be hoarded, and power was maintained through relentless production and violence.

When God brings Israel into the wilderness, God puts forward a clear change for their collective consciousness. The Commandments are given not to restrict their life, but to guide their newly found freedom.

Consider the command to honor the Sabbath: “*Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God*” (Exodus 20:9–10). In a people who have been laboring every day of the week, the Sabbath is a revolutionary act of divine resistance. God declares that human worth is not tied to constant productivity. Neither the laborer nor working animal is to be exploited without end. Sabbath is God’s holy “No!” to the relentless demands put upon a people.

For this rector and your parishes, Exodus 20 sets the spiritual boundary lines. Ministry is not about overworking the priest or burning out congregations to satisfy metrics of worldly success. Ministry does include building a community of radical Sabbath, mutual honor, and holy freedom rooted in a God who provided this guidance for God’s people.

Turning to the Gospel of Matthew, we enter a vineyard that has become a site of deep struggle.

Jesus opens this parable by quoting the exact words of Isaiah 5: the Song of the Vineyard. He speaks of a landowner who plants a vineyard, digs a winepress, builds a watchtower, hedges it around with care, and leases it to tenants before going away. Every ear tuned to the Hebrew scriptures in Jesus’ day would have immediately recognized this language. Choosing these words provides Jesus with some “street cred”. In Isaiah 5, God is the loving owner of the vineyard who clears the stones and plants choice vines, looking for a bountiful harvest.

Yet, there is a profound shift from the Isaiah version to Matthew that we must not miss. In Isaiah 5, the *vines* themselves fail by producing wild, bitter grapes. The people of Israel did not grow in the way God intended. But in Matthew 21, Jesus shifts the crisis from the vines to the *tenants*—the spiritual caretakers. The problem was not bad soil, bad weather, or a lack of resources; it was a self-serving leadership of the vineyard that mistook temporary stewardship for absolute ownership.

In first-century Roman-occupied Palestine elite absentee landowners frequently bought up small ancestral family farms from peasants who had defaulted on debts or taxes. The original farmers were reduced to tenant laborers on the very land their ancestors had tended for generations. The

social dynamic was fraught with economic exploitation, systemic dispossession, and deep-seated agrarian resentment.

The tenants in Jesus' parable are frustrated by working the land and making payment to an absent landowner who they do not respect and in fact believe they know better than. When the owner sends his servants—in this parable who represent the prophets throughout history—they beat, stone, and kill them. Finally, when he sends his "beloved son," thinking they will respect his heir, the tenants say, *"This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance."* They cast him out of the vineyard and execute him. The tenants, representing in this parable, the spiritual leaders and elders of the day, believed that by killing the heir, eventually they would become the owners of the Vineyard.

The tenants in Matthew 21 did not start out as violent conspirators. They began as long-term caretakers who slowly, over time, convinced themselves: *"We built this. We worked this ground. We bled for this field. Therefore, this vineyard belongs to us."*

The Gospel speaks an urgent word to us today: **Spiritual maturity is not about guarding what we have built; it is about holding God's vineyard with open hands and hearts.**

These parishes do not belong to this rector. They do not belong to the wardens, the vestries, or even the families whose names are on items in these churches. These parishes are God's vineyard.

We are but temporary stewards of God's work in these communities. The challenge is to relinquish the need to control, hoard, or protect our status or our resources. We open the doors wide so that all of God's children may partake in the harvest of God's grace.

Jesus quotes Psalm 118: *"The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes."*

Society often casts these "stones" aside as peripheral. Yet God routinely chooses the very people, perspectives, and truths that the world rejects to serve as the foundational cornerstones of our communities.

As you begin this pastoral chapter together, ask each other: Who are the rejected stones in these communities? Whose voices have been silenced or ignored?

Jesus offers a sobering warning: the Kingdom is given to *“a people producing its fruits”* (Matthew 21:43).

God is not interested in shallow religious performance, pristine property maintenance, or pious rhetoric that yields no tangible fruit. God desires the fruit that Isaiah spoke of and Jesus embodied: **justice** instead of bloodshed, **righteousness** instead of the outcry of the oppressed.

If our worship does not compel us to feed the hungry, be in community, and stand alongside the marginalized, then we are offering God sour grapes.

Becki, today you are installed not as a monarch or a master of the vineyard, but as a humble co-laborer in God’s field.

Look at these nice people. You tell me all the time - they are a resilient, gifted, and spirit filled people. Love them fiercely – I know how much you do. Pray for them constantly – I know how much you do. Rest alongside them – mmmmm this one is a bit harder. Your calling is to tend the vines, to nourish the soil, to proclaim the Gospel and to break bread. Walk with them with open hands, making space for new life to sprout in unexpected places.

All those who gather here - walk with Becki, and please - safeguard her well-being. Protect her Sabbath. Remember that she, too, is a child of God who needs your prayers and grace. Grant her the space, along with you, to dream about the future God has for your churches.

Together, you are called to stand at the foot of the mountain in holy awe, living out the freedom of God's commandments. Together, you are called to tend God’s vineyard with humility, open hands, and justice—never claiming ownership but always offering back the abundant fruits of love and peace.

Amen.