

- Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 - Isaiah 5:1-7 - Philippians 3:4b-14 - Matthew 21:33-46

“Just wait till the boss comes back...”

1. When you go to school, you expect to receive grades as an individual student
 - a. I have in my files somewhere report cards from when I was in elementary school, my college transcripts, and my diplomas from seminary.
 - b. They all have my name on them. They detail the grades I earned. They state that I fulfilled the courses and passed them.
 - c. With dad being a teacher, he emphasized that you studied hard, that you did your homework.
 - i. We had two encyclopedias at home (this is of course pre-internet).
 - ii. We did not live near a public library.
 - iii. I did my work and studied for my tests. I got good grades.
 - iv. And when I didn't, I knew what to do to bring them back up.
 1. Work harder. Get a tutor. Ask the teacher. Try again.
 - d. But there were many times when my grade didn't depend on what I did, not entirely.
 - i. There were the dreaded team projects when we were assigned one or more partners to work on an experiment or a project of some sort.
 - ii. The team got a grade. The same grade for each of the members.
 - iii. Inevitably there were the team members who worked as hard as I did, and the team members who coasted and did the bare minimum.
 - iv. I wasn't their supervisor or their dad, so I just put my head down, did what I needed to do, and tried to get them to do their part, to mixed results.
 - e. Imagine my surprise when, on my first class in my Doctor of Ministry, the professor asked the entire class (8 of us) to work as a team and decide what our learning goals would be as a group
 - i. (this group would stay together our four years of the doctorate).
 - ii. I wasn't ready for this level of group work, with the final result of us as a group determining the next four years of our work together
 - iii. Those group goals would be used to determine half of classes teachers would eventually offer us.
 - iv. The stakes felt incredibly high! And it was up to the group!
 - v. I learned something incredibly important that semester:

1. There is a difference between the goals of an individual and the goals of a group
 2. Think of it like a basketball team
 3. An individual's goal may be to really play good defense, or another one to score 20 points, but the goal of the team would be to play together and fair, to be unselfish, and seek to get the upper hand on their opponents
 4. I learned that to discover the group goals you don't just add together the goals of defense and individual scoring, but rather to consider a higher goal (play fair) as a way to shine as a team
 - vi. So while I had to work on my own assignments and get graded individually, the fact that we were working as a team in my Doctorate cohort, meant that we were all involved in more than just getting a piece of paper on the wall, but we were actually learning and growing in ministry
2. You can see, then, how today's passages spotlight the needed work of a group instead of the work of individuals
- a. The vineyard in Isaiah represents the people of God – those whom God has called to serve God and be God's people.
 - i. Isaiah was a prophet who shared God's message of judgement for the sinful actions of God's people. They were producing bad grapes.
 - ii. All the care God took of the vineyard led to bad fruit.
 - iii. In that story the vineyard hasn't produced the work of justice which God had hoped for
 - iv. Not an individual vine or a few little grapes
 - v. All the vines were bad. The ground was bad. Take it all down and restart.
 - b. In the gospel passage, the original audience would have immediately understood the reference to that very Isaiah passage.
 - i. Already the tension around Jesus had been rising to a fever pitch.
 - ii. Earlier in this chapter we read about Palm Sunday' entry to Jerusalem, and Jesus turning of the tables at the temple.
 - iii. So when Jesus adds the image of the violent hired tenant farmers, the leaders realize the thinly veiled reference to themselves.
 - iv. "Hey! Jesus is saying we're not taking care of God's vineyard, or that we're trying to steal from it rather than do what we're supposed to do on behalf of the vineyard owner!"

3. Join me in considering this, then: what would it be like if being a follower of God isn't only about what we each do, but first about what we do together, as a team?
 - a. Today is World Communion Sunday, a day when we celebrate that there are faithful people around the globe who gather to have communion, all of us feeling very much of one heart and mind.
 - b. World Communion Sunday first became a part of the church in the United States first in the years after World War I. It may have felt like we were coming out of a terrible moment in human history and we were seeking unity
 - c. Imagine then what it would have been like to still celebrate it when the world was again at war, with people risking their lives for peace and freedom
 - d. The world is on fire yet today, in different ways
 - e. There is staggering economic, racial and ecological injustice and tremendous suffering because of it
 - f. This isn't the time to say "hey teacher, grade me on my homework only – don't look at the mess my classmates are doing over there!"
 - g. This is the time to come together as a team, symbolically around this table, to work spiritually as a unit to produce good fruits of justice, fruits God wants
4. Our work as followers of God is a team effort. We're not just a bunch of players sent on the court to worry only about our individual stats. How we collaborate here and beyond these walls is part of the faithful work of being in communion with each other across the world.

Questions for reflection

1. Think of a time in school when you had a group project, and remember what it was like to work with the others in the team.
2. Why is it that in the passages in Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-46, it seems that the actions of the whole community are being judged, not that of individuals?
3. How do we hold each other accountable in community to work towards common goals, rather than just "mind your own business" and hope it all turns out well in the end?