

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A  
Isaiah 5:1-7  
Psalm 80:9, 12, 13-14, 15-16, 19-20  
Philippians 4:6-9  
Matthew 21:33-43  
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The tenant farmers in our Gospel murdered their landlord's servants, because they didn't want to give him his share of the grapes. Then they killed his son, so they could take the vineyard for themselves. In other words, the workers were declaring complete independence from the fellow who'd built the vineyard. They wanted to be altogether free of him. They hoped that he would go away and leave them alone.

Of course, the landowner in the story represents God, and we human beings are the tenants. God built our vineyard. God gave us everything we have and everything we are. Yet, out of a misguided instinct for independence, we often struggle to be free of God. We regard God's will for us as an unreasonable constraint on our own will. We deny God his share of the grapes.

In doing so, we are treating God according to the same rules we apply to the rest of our lives. There is a lot of disagreement these days about values. But if there is one value that still reigns supreme in our culture, it's freedom. Freedom is still worth struggling for. We dislike laws that unnecessarily restrict individual freedom. Internet articles and self-help books urge us to throw off the constraints that limit us in our jobs and our relationships. Television commercials promise that the products they advertise will enhance our freedom in all sorts of marvelous ways.

We want to be free to develop our talents to their full extent -- to be all that we can be. In the midst of all of this, is it any wonder that we also want to be free *from God?* -- that we should regard our role as God's creatures, to be demeaning to our human dignity? -- as just another limit on our human potential?

Of course, this attitude shows a terrible lack of gratitude toward God, who made us and who loves us. But more than that, it is completely wrong-headed and counter-productive. The denial of our rightful relationship with God sabotages our one real hope of freedom, and our one real chance to achieve our human potential. Let me give you two reasons why this is true.

First, God doesn't want to thwart us or hold us back from our potential. Jesus says, "I have come that you may have life, and have it to its fullest." Creation has been God's effort to give us creatures everything that could be given. But like a new car, or a new camera, the universe comes with an operating manual -- God's law. The demands God makes of us are not arbitrary. They really correspond to something within our own nature - the law of our existence in the world God has given us. Our freedom is situated within the conditions that are healthful and give life. Freedom pressed beyond these boundaries has disastrous consequences.

When a mother tells her little daughter, "never touch the stove," she isn't trying to limit the child's freedom. She is only telling her how the world works. If she defies her mother, she's likely to get hurt. When Jesus tells us to love God and love our neighbor he is telling *us* how the world works. We needn't look far to see the terrible consequences of disobedience. But if we obey Christ's commands, there is no limit to what

we can accomplish -- no limit to who we can be.

Second, everything that God creates refers to God. Every creature necessarily stands in relation to its creator. It is the same with human creativity. Imagine a little girl who has been working diligently in her room, for the better part of an hour, with crayons and drawing paper. Finally, she's satisfied that her masterpiece is finished, and she runs to the living room to show it to her father.

Dad studies the paper appreciatively for a moment, and then says, "Sweetheart it's beautiful.....What is it?" The little girl, amazed and a little offended at her father's ignorance, replies, "it's a lion of course! -- a great ferocious lion, who has just woken up from a nap and is now looking for something to eat." Father says, "Oh yes I can see it perfectly now," and everyone is happy. But take away the little artist, and what are we left with? The king of the beasts is reduced to nothing more than a smudge of brown wax on paper.

It is the same with us. What is a human being? Ask the artist -- our creator. Human beings are creatures made in God's own image. God loves them so much that he became incarnated as one of them, and died for them, so that they could live forever with him. Reject God, as an obstacle to human freedom -- refuse to recognize our status as created beings -- and what are you left with? What is a human being then? A featherless biped? Far from being an insult to human dignity, our relationship with God is the *source* of our human dignity.

The deep yearning that human beings feel for freedom, is one of God's greatest gifts to us. The love of freedom is responsible for much that is beautiful and precious in the world. But if we turn our instinct for freedom *against God*, the results are disastrous. If, on the other hand, we

are able to overcome our human instinct to fight free of God -- if we give God his due -- our human dignity is assured, and our human potential unleashed. That is a high return indeed, for a share of the grapes.