

**Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – October 8, 2017**  
**Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Parochial Administrator**

When I was growing up in East Memphis, we had a vineyard on our property. Well, it was more like a grape arbor in the backyard than a real vineyard. I'd like to tell you it was a beautiful Tuscan setting, but actually, the former owners of our home had taken the rusted frame of an old swing-set, attached cyclone fencing around it, and allowed grape vines to grow over it. By the time we bought the property, the sole purpose of the grape arbor was as a bird feeder. Oh, we occasionally got a few grapes off of those vines – my mother managed to make a few jars of grape jelly – but most of the time the birds beat us to the harvest. Some years after moving into the house, my father discovered wine making. He often made wine out of elderberries, and sometimes other fruit – but I don't think he ever got a drop of wine from our vineyard of grapes. Those grapes proved to be just too much work.

For the third Sunday in a row, the parable in our gospel today takes us back to the vineyard. Recall that one of the most ancient Scriptural images for the people of Israel is that of a vineyard. As today's psalm response clearly states, "The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel." The Lord God chose and tends the vines that make up his vineyard, his chosen people. Sometimes the vineyard is healthy, producing a wonderful harvest. Think Tuscany or Napa Valley. And sometimes, as our first reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah tells us, the harvest brings forth nothing but wild grapes. It is of no further use than to be uprooted and trampled underfoot – which is what we eventually did to our converted swing-set grape arbor. That transition from a cultivated vineyard to wild grapes is – to some extent – natural. That's what happens to grape vines over time. But it is also the product of human work – or the lack of human work. You see, if the workers in the vineyard are not doing their jobs, not pruning, not removing the hazards of thorns and briars – well, the vines will naturally, eventually produce wild fruit. To produce good grapes – to ultimately produce good wine – you need both: good vines and good workers. And as the workers of the vineyard, as tenants of the landowner's vineyard, we often fall down on the job.

Look at the parable carefully. Jesus tells us that it is the landowner – God – who planted the vineyard, put in a hedge, dug a winepress and built a tower. God did most of the work. Then he turned it over to the tenants. All they had to do was keep the vines pruned and fertilized, weeded and watered, and ultimately collect the harvest. But those tenants got a little too greedy – they began to think of themselves as the owners of the vineyard. They could do with the harvest as they wished. So they ran off the landowner's servants – the prophets of the Old Testament, in scriptural terms. Eventually, the landowner sent his own son to collect the harvest – but the tenants didn't respect the heir, didn't respect the landowner's son. They saw his visit as an opportunity to take over – kill the heir and claim the inheritance, they thought. Jesus, of course, the only begotten Son of the Father, was predicting his own suffering and death. Here was the Son of God who

would be rejected and killed by the tenants of the vineyard. But this parable is about much more than a prediction of the Passion, about much more than a brief summary of salvation history.

Each of us, you see, is still a tenant in the vineyard of the Lord. Each of us is called to prune and to harvest, to cultivate and to nurture – all for the good of the kingdom. And sometimes we do a really good job. Sometimes we are about the work, tending the delicate vines that come into our care. Sometimes we reach out and help others, we place their needs ahead of our own desires. But all too often, we are like those tenants in the parable. We forget that God owns the vineyard – we think of ourselves as the owners – we think of ourselves as God. In this month dedicated to the respect for life, this inclination toward playing God is evident in the ways we as a society treat human life. With the help of modern science and medicine, our culture encourages taking God out of the process of creating life. With in-vitro fertilization and other scientific techniques on the one hand, and contraception, sterilization, embryo destruction and abortion on the other, we have taken unto ourselves the decision of when life should begin and, in some cases, when it should end. We are also a society plagued by violence and terrorism, by drug abuse and institutionalized poverty, a society that sees the death penalty and euthanasia as the answer to those whose lives are no longer convenient. Too many in our culture have taken unto themselves the decision of who should continue to live, and who should die. We are appropriately horrified when confronted with incidents of mass murder such as we witnessed in Las Vegas last weekend. But, truthfully, in a society that has cheapened and disrespected human life at all stages, in a culture that promotes obscenely violent movies and video games, in a society that seems to thrive on anger and create conflict, can we really be surprised when one person kills fifty-eight people at one time rather than one-by-one as seems to occur every day and every night in every city in America? Yes, we are those tenants in the parable – out to make sure that we are in control of the vineyard. The landowner – God – had better not interfere.

Now as individual Christians, we cannot change all of society – but we can decide whether we will be a positive influence on it or whether we will just go with the flow. Even people of faith, it seems, see nothing wrong with many of the attacks on the sanctity of human life that are so common in our times. We look the other way rather than standing up or speaking out. We fear being thought of as out of step with the so-called modern world, or being dismissed as someone who is hopelessly out of touch. It is, of course, our society that has lost hope, our society that is out of touch with our creator. It may be that this vineyard cannot be saved, that it needs to be uprooted and trampled underfoot. That will be for God to decide. In the meantime, as long as we are here, we must make every effort to restore the vineyard to its former glory – weeding away the destructive attitudes, nurturing the vines that others want to uproot. We must do our best to respect the vines that the landowner has planted. In the end, when the landowner's son returns to collect the harvest, we can dismiss him and seek the inheritance for ourselves, or we can welcome him as faithful tenants. Before us stand life and death – choose life.