Sermon for Oct. 4, 2026, FPC Marshfield, "Where is Justice and Peace?"
Rev. Dr. Janet E. Wolfe
Texts: Isaiah 5:1-7, Matthew 21:33-46

Both of our texts for today use imagery of a vineyard. What is the meaning of this usage? In Isaiah, the vineyard is planted with great love and care, providing all the protection it needs to be productive and to produce great wine. However, something goes wrong. The vineyard produces wild grapes, unsuitable for a good wine. So the owner pulls down the hedges and the watchtower and lets it be trampled. It will receive no rain, so will not produce anything and will be overrun with briers and thorns. The last sentence declares that the vineyard is the house of Israel. God expected justice but saw bloodshed, righteousness but heard a cry!

In any text like this, we must be careful that it is not setting Jews against Christians. After all, Jesus was a Jew and Christianity was not a separate religion for a couple of centuries after he lived.

In Matthew, we have a parable about a vineyard in which the owner planted it carefully and then leased it out to tenants and went away to another country. When it came time to collect the produce, he sent his slaves to collect it. But the tenants seized the slaves and tortured and killed them. So the landlord sent some more slaves and they were treated in the same way. So he decided to send his son, thinking that the tenants would respect him. Again, they killed the son, hoping to take his inheritance and become the owners of the vineyard.

Those hearing this parable assumed that the tenants themselves would be tortured and killed, but that is not God's way. Jesus quoted to them, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parable, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him but they feared the crowds because they regarded Jesus as a prophet.

This parable is part of Jesus' teaching in the temple after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, so it is near the time when Jesus himself will be executed by the Romans. After he was crucified, God vindicated him by raising him from the dead.

What are we to learn from these stories? First, we learn that God expects justice. That is not retributive justice, where people are punished, but restorative justice, where we are returned to God's intentions. I was just hearing on the news about a botched execution attempt in Tennessee, where the woman was injected with what was supposed to be lethal drugs, but they did not work. I am glad that Wisconsin is a state that does not seek the death penalty and I would like to see it abolished nationwide. I think it is

up to God to decide when we are to die, and besides, if a person is given life in prison they have a long time to think about what it was that they did that put them in prison. Also, there is a long history of racial bias in the way the death penalty is administered. Bryan Stevenson, author of "Just Mercy," tells a lot of stories about the injustice of the death penalty. He gives many examples of biased juries or judges and other ways in which the death penalty is sought unjustly. There is also a long history of the lynching of black people where they are unjustly hanged.

I asked in the title of the sermon about peace. The news also reported that the United States had just now pulled all all troops out of Iraq after more than twenty years. The Bush administration claimed that Saddam Hussein, the dictator of Iraq, had weapons of mass destruction; they did not. Most of the people involved in the Sept.11, 2001 attacks on the United States were from Saudi Arabia; yet we have always regarded Saudi Arabia as a friend, primarily because we needed their oil. Under the Obama administration, our troops did take out Osama bin Laden, but there are several people at Guantanimo Bay prison that have not even bee tried yet after 25 years. The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is another area of injustice. Israel was established in 1948 as a response to the Nazi Holocaust of World War II, but the Palestinians have lived for hundreds of years since the Israelites occupied the land during the Roman Empire. The Netanayu administration is not willing to consider a two state solution and has allowed settlers, often violent, to occupy the land on the West Bank and Gaza strip. The United States has not been supportive of a two state solution either. The current conflict with Iran does not seem to have much justice either. Under the Obama administration, an agreement was reached with the Iranians about nuclear weapons but the Trump administration has canceled that.

We have not cared for God's creation in the way that scripture calls us to do. Though most people in this church are supportive of addressing human-caused climate change, many people deny it as a problem, no matter how much extreme weather we have.

Let us seek justice for all people, regardless of their status or their place of residence. We are all created in God's image and we often do not treat one another in a way that illustrates the truth of that. Every Sunday we confess our sins, but we believe in God's forgiveness and mercy. May we recognize this! In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.