Homily for 27th Sunday
October 5, 2014

Readings: Is. 5.1-7, Ps. 80, Phil. 4.6-9, Mt. 21.33-43
Place: NU campus @ 11am
Theme: Appreciate the good that God has done for us.

A friend of mine makes his own wine. Previously when I have visited his wine cellar, I have admired his extensive collection of bottled wines. Never have I asked any questions about the process of wine-making. Because this Sunday’s readings refer to owning and working a vineyard, I visited my friend this past week in order to ask questions. I’d like to share some things which I learned, and apply them to today’s readings.

Developing a vineyard and making a profit requires much knowledge and hard work. The soil needs to be just right: neither too acidic nor too alkaline. Vineyards typically are located near lakes whose cool breezes moderate temperatures, which are to range from a high of 87 degrees to a low of 20 degrees for about 200 frost-free days annually. Notice that our Niagara Lakes region allows northern breezes to sweep across the lakes, cool the vineyards, flow into the escarpment and then bounce back over the vineyards which effectively lengthens our growing season. In the eastern USA, a wine-growing triangle flourishes from Western New York to Virginia to Martha’s Vineyard. When you and I drive past vineyards, we observe the perfectly straight rows of plantings. As the grape leaves grow, the owner of the vineyard cuts them back to maximize exposure to the sun. Throughout the growing season, the grower must watch for harmful insects, animals, and diseases. Harvesting may be done by machinery which takes most of the grapes, but not the low-hanging fruit. For processing, the grapes are removed from their stems which are more acidic than the grapes. The grapes need to be crushed, pressed, and allowed to ferment but not too little and not too much, and certain natural chemicals can be added to hasten or slow down the process. Twenty pounds of grapes are needed to produce one gallon of wine. Time is required; it takes four years for the grapes to develop the desired roots. Overall, I learned that it takes a lot more work and time to produce a bottle of wine than to drink a bottle of wine!!

Why have I spent so much time and ink on this lengthy introduction to the readings? … Understanding the background of the extraordinary care and complexity involved in developing a vineyard helps me to appreciate more than ever God’s care and provision for his people. Isaiah, writing around 750 BC, describes an owner who developed a vineyard, but all that he received for his investment of time, money, and continuous care was wild grapes! With that, the owner is ready to let this vineyard go to seed, to tear down the protective hedge and stone wall, to let animals graze and passersby trample the vineyard. … But as the Book of Isaiah continues for many more chapters, the owner will reconsider, and will take another chance at restoring and developing his vineyard. This story serves as a metaphor for God’s relationship with his Chosen People; we just sang in the Responsorial Psalm: “the vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.” God did all the right and good things for his people, but his Chosen People responded by doing many wrong things, producing metaphorically not good wine but wild grapes.
In the gospel, Jesus presents the parable of the owner of a vineyard and his tenants. The owner expects to collect compensation from the tenants. But when the owner sends his servants one at a time to collect what is owed, the tenants reject them, beat them and kill them. The owner finally sends his son since he believes surely, “they will respect my son.” The tenants, however, conspire to kill the son. They imagine that then there would be no heirs, which would enable the tenants to inherit the field, and to do whatever they want. The parable of the owner of the vineyard serves as an analogy of God’s having sent prophets, all 16 of whom the Jews killed. Finally he sends his only Son, Jesus. But Jesus too, the people would kill. In John’s gospel, Jesus continues the theme of the vineyard, declaring, “I am the vine, and you are the branches. He who lives in me and I in him, will produce abundantly.” (Jn. 15.4-5)

How might we apply this metaphor and parable to our lives? ... What might you do? ... For myself, I oftentimes take for granted almost every breath, every opening of my eyes, every step I walk, almost all my thoughts, words, and deeds. I do begin each day, lying in bed praying for a variety of individuals, and for global situations. In chapel at daily morning prayers, I pray the psalms with my Vincentian confreres, but at this early morning hour, sometimes I mouth the words instead of reflecting on them. Maybe you have similar experiences? ... I think I need to go out of my way to explicitly thank God. I’m pretty good at asking God for things, but I’m not so good at thanking God for all that he does in and through Jesus, Mary and the saints, for the Church and for the world, and for my family, friends and myself. Maybe I’m like the tenant farmers in the gospel; certainly, I like to have things my way, and not always God’s way. Most times I want to do things God’s way, but oftentimes, I lack the discipline to follow through on my good intentions. I think I need to make more time and space whether here in Alumni Chapel or at home to properly appreciate and explicitly thank God for all the good that God has done.

Just as it takes a lot more time and work to produce a bottle of wine than to drink it, we all should probably take a lot more time to appreciate and thank God for all the good that he has done for us.