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St. John's Episcopal Church  
COMMITMENT SUNDAY

## COMMANDMENTS, VINEYARDS AND BASEBALL

At first glance, I could not see any connections between Moses' delivery of the 10 commandments and today's vineyard allegory from Matthew. But there are a few. In the reading from *Exodus 20*, Moses is at the base of the holy mountain of God, Mt. Sinai, where Yahweh has given him the Law. The mountain is sacred because it is where divine and human relationship takes place. If God were just to up there all by himself it would seem a much less holy place. So, the mountain is like a temple or church or a mosque where we bring our longings for God and our hopes for some kind of an encounter. It is not far-fetched to say that these buildings, with their upward architectural thrust, their steeples, spires and minarets imitate holy mountain peaks, reaching towards heaven. Please consider the parallels between Moses at the base of the holy mountain delivering the 10 Commandments and Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem upbraiding the Chief Priests for their failure in keeping those Commandments.

The Law given to the Hebrew people in the desert charged them to live a certain way that would bring social and moral order. It established priorities that place the worship of God at the top, sets aside the seventh day for holy rest and worship, and rejects all forms of idolatry. If one were to follow the four spiritual commandments pertaining to right relationship with God, then adherence to the other 6 might be more likely to follow. It would be harder to send young people off to war or execute someone in the name of the state. The commandments are not conditional. They are not "suggestions". They are also a really tall order for us human beings.

Today's gospel reading from Matthew finds Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem confronting the Chief Priests and Pharisees. The image of a "vineyard" is a familiar metaphor to Jewish ears. A vineyard represents the covenant God established with the Hebrew people at the foot of Mt. Sinai where they received the Law. In the eyes of prophets and poets, the Hebrew nation *itself* is God's vineyard. Good stewardship of the vineyard is the role of religious leaders. The vineyard is intended to be a place of human collaboration with God and relationship with the creation. It is also the place where God's justice and compassion are planted. Finally, the vineyard is a place of fertility and harvest. The grapes are transformed into wine offered to God and shared in human celebration. Hold that thought until the next time someone offers a wine toast at

a special feast or until you next receive the wine blessed at our altar. The vineyard connects earth to heaven.

The juxtaposition of the 10 commandments story and the vineyard allegory shows how far we can fall from our intended vocations of loving God and our neighbors. In the vineyard, things have really run amok. Is this so hard to believe? No.

Inside the Temple, Jesus castigates the Chief Priests and Pharisees for their failure to be good stewards of God's holy vineyard. Rather than protecting the powerless, their power consumes them. They have rendered God inaccessible to the faithful in this place intended for holy encounter. St. John's is also a place intended for such encounters. Just three days ago, I noticed someone sitting in deep quiet in our church, perhaps being blessed and blessing us as well. This church is the vineyard given into *our* charge.

As an extended metaphor, an allegory assumes that the listener "already knows about the reality being symbolized (McFague). An allegory is translucent..."

In the vineyard allegory, I would suggest the following breakdown of the "cast".

The "landowner" is God.

The "slaves" who are beaten and killed represent God's prophets who, for hundreds of years, came with God's word but were forcefully rejected, stoned or killed by the religious and political leaders of Israel.

The "tenants" represent the current corrupt and ruthless Temple establishment in Jerusalem.

The "son" and heir, the last to be sent, is Jesus himself, God's son, who will be tortured and killed by the religious powers and Vichy-esque puppets of Rome.

The "key" to unlocking the allegory comes right after it ends. In case the listeners have any doubts or confusion about what Jesus means, he quotes psalm 118, "*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone*". It is understood then that Jesus himself, is the chief cornerstone and that they are rejecting him. The "son" who is killed in the vineyard and the rejected "stone" are the same.

The words of today's' gospel are attributed to Jesus long after his death and resurrection. They reflect the understanding of the early Christian community 60 years after his death and about 15-20 after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple itself in 70 AD. We cannot determine whether or not the words are exactly those of Jesus. Nevertheless, it seems very likely that there was a real showdown between him and the Temple authorities. The gospels of

Mark, Luke and Thomas also attest to this confrontation through the vineyard allegory.

What are we to make of this unsettling gospel? Any literal interpretation or deciphering would be depressing and unhelpful. We have to struggle with this.

Let's extrapolate on the vineyard metaphor. Imagine that it stands for places of holiness, including our very souls, and also our communal portion of God's vineyard, St. John's Church itself. How lovingly do we care for our holy places? Are justice and compassion planted in them? Are we generous and compassionate stewards of our own interior selves? Are we generous stewards of our few acres of God's vineyard in our parish? Are we open to trying new things to improve our relationship with the "landowner" (God) and our fellow "tenants" (each other)?

Switching metaphors now ...

The movie, *Moneyball*, is based upon the true story of the Oakland Athletics and their general manager, Billy Beane. The A's had a good record in 2001, but their stars were all lured away by bigger money teams such as the Yankees and the Red Sox. The budget of the Athletics was tight. Beane would have to win games the next season without the big stars.

He will have to *do baseball differently*. Beane hires a young assistant, Pete, who is only a few years out of Yale where he majored in economics. Pete has a new approach to putting together a baseball team that flies in the face of all the traditional ways. He advises Beane to ignore flashy players and zero in on the most important statistical question of all ... what percentage of the time does a player get on base? It doesn't matter how you get there. If you don't get on base you don't get runs, and then you don't win games. No one had ever used this formula before. The criteria for choosing players *had been* batting average, star power, personality, fielding, running and the pulchritude of the player's girlfriend or wife. But getting on base is the essence of Pete's approach.

Billy brings Pete to a meeting with all the Athletics' seasoned, leathery baseball scouts whose approach is traditional and who are resistant to new ideas, especially from Pete, who looks like anything *but* a baseball player or scout. It is a tough session, but as General Manager, Beane prevails and he puts together a team of the injured, older, less glamorous and sometimes rejected players. It looks like God's little army.

The season starts disastrously. Over time, however, and with some tweaking of the new approach, the A's begin to win games. People are stunned. Beane spends more time with players and he himself begins to change. Incredibly, during that 2002 season, the A's break a longstanding American

League record for the most consecutive games won in a row. Twenty! The excitement of the fans and the Press is fantastic.

At St. John's this year, the Vestry and I decided to do church differently, that is, to do our Annual Appeal differently. Very differently. Today is the culmination of a 6-week intensive effort that has involved as many as 35 parishioners serving in a variety of roles and includes also a large number of home visits.

At first, we did not know exactly where we were going or how this was going to work. We had hired an excellent consultant, Maryann Doyle, to lead us, but we ourselves were a little in the dark. Sometimes it felt like that clubhouse room with all the seasoned baseball scouts doubting the new approach. But we kept on. People began to say, "Yes, we can try that". And so we have.

Today I believe our "team" is stronger and healthier, more united as a body of faithful. Our community of caring has been strengthened. This required courage and a spirit of adventure, and we rose to the challenge. Thank you and congratulations!

Now let's go out there and hit some more out of the park!

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## **Exodus 20:1-20**

Then God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup>I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, <sup>6</sup>but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. <sup>7</sup>You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. <sup>8</sup>Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>10</sup>But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. <sup>11</sup>For in six

days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

<sup>12</sup>Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. <sup>13</sup>You shall not murder. <sup>14</sup>You shall not commit adultery. <sup>15</sup>You shall not steal. <sup>16</sup>You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. <sup>17</sup>You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

<sup>18</sup>When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, <sup>19</sup>and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." <sup>20</sup>Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

#### MATTHEW 20:33ff

<sup>33</sup>"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. <sup>34</sup>When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. <sup>35</sup>But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. <sup>36</sup>Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. <sup>37</sup>Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' <sup>38</sup>But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'" <sup>39</sup>So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. <sup>40</sup>Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" <sup>41</sup>They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." <sup>42</sup>Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders

rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? <sup>43</sup>Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. <sup>44</sup>The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." <sup>45</sup>When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. <sup>46</sup>They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.