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10.7.17 Homily

Twenty-Seventh Ordinary

Isa 5:1-7; Ps 80:9,12-16,19-20; Phil 4:6-9; Matt 21:33-43

*Elsie Hainz McGrath*

I know something about grapes. Sour grapes. Wild grapes. Unwanted grapes. My Juniper trees are full of them. They are marauders and murderers, and I am in a back-breaking struggle to save the lives of my once majestic Junipers. Quite a difference from the grape vines I was introduced to in Germany and in Spain, even in parts of our state of Missouri. Those grapes are as meticulously planted and nurtured and eagerly awaited as the ones described in today's readings. They seem to cover every rolling hill in the fertile Rhine Valley without ever invading the numerous fruit trees that also dotted the landscape and are lovingly harvested as well. No Juniper berries are choked out by invasive vines that yield sour grapes.

Which reminds me of the old joke about the lavish garden a man was tending in front of his home when, one day, the local *male* parish priest ambled past and felt compelled to make small talk. "Ah, Mr. O'Leary, 'tis a lovely garden that you and the Lord have growing there." To which the farmer replied, "Yeah, Father, but you should have seen it when God was doing it all alone!"

God needs our help. Always. In every circumstance.

And the invitation is never rescinded. God *wants* to welcome us and celebrate with us. And *work* with us too. Because God's vineyard, the so-called "house of Israel," IS us – daughters and sons, molded in the image and likeness of that divinity with which we are sparked and infused. But the results seem to never change, throughout all of history which, as we are wont to say, repeats itself over and over and over.

Our first reading is believed to be a unique didactic (or teaching) poem that may have been composed for the celebration of Sukkot, the Festival of the Booths, a seven-day harvest festival which is ironically being celebrated at this very time by our Jewish sisters and brothers. The people, when faced with YHWH's questions, were *obliged* to pass judgment upon themselves. *They* were YHWH's vineyard; *they* betrayed their covenant. What follows for the majority of chapter 7 are YHWH's reproaches for the people's unfaithfulness: violence and bloodshed; homelessness and unemployment; drunkenness and depravity. Of course.

Jesus picks up the theme in today's parable, but, as is too often the case, those who compiled our lectionary readings didn't give us the whole pericope, which makes our ability to understand it that much more difficult. So let's listen to it now in the context of what we know about the first reading. Recall that Jesus has pretty much retold the poem. And, like YHWH in Isaiah's writing, he has posed a question: *When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those farmers?* To which we hear the answer given by the chief priests and the Pharisees and the beginning of Jesus' response: *Haven't you read in the scriptures: 'A stone that the builders rejected has ended up as the keystone. It was God's doing and is something you admire'?* Therefore, I say to you, *God's domain will be taken away from you and given to a people that bears its fruit.* The pericope continues: *The one who falls on this stone will be broken into pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.* // ***When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds because they regarded him as a prophet.***

So here's *my* question: Can we *ever* get over ourselves and stop blaming God for what we bring upon ourselves? Can we *ever* develop a worldwide group ethos that is faithful enough to get rid of our ongoing sins of violence and bloodshed, homelessness and unemployment, drunkenness and depravity?

Let us pray again – over and over and over – with today's psalmist: *You plant your Seed into each heart, O Beloved, and cultivate the soil of our goodness. You nourish us with the food of Love, with streams of Living Water. Be our strength as we break down walls that separate and divide. Roll away the stones that become obstacles to growth. Receive our*

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*gratitude, O Heart of all hearts! Look upon us, and see what Love can do. Rejoice in the new birth that you create. Be glad where your Seed has found fertile ground. May all who have borne the fruit of love radiate your Spirit into the world. May we always walk and co-create with you. Restore us, O Holy One!*

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10.21.17 Homily

Twenty-Ninth Ordinary

Isa 45:1,4-6; Ps 96:1,3-5,7-10; 1 Thes 1:1-5a; Matt 22:15-22

*Elsie Hainz McGrath*

*Give to God glory and honor.*

Everyone is responsible. What role are you called to, what must you give, in order to be faithful to who God is in your life?

I found these readings to be about the separation of church and state, so to speak. I think, if we really pay attention to what they are telling us, we will find that church and state cannot be separated. 'Cause they both belong to God. It all belongs to God, regardless of the name or names we might know God as in our inmost being. Everything is one.

Which is really what our own U.S. dogma of the Separation of Church and State says, actually. The First Amendment reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." How this single, simple sentence continues to be used as a club against certain religions in particular and everything that is sacred in general is mind-boggling.

Let's look at our first reading for further proof of who's in charge. God has anointed Cyrus. That means Cyrus is the chosen one, the leader, the ruler, the boss. God has anointed him king of Babylon, a nation of so-called pagans who have enslaved the nation of Israel for the past 40 years. It's time for these people to be freed, so they can go home if they wish, and Cyrus will do God's bidding. Even though he doesn't know who God is. Because there is no separation of church and state. Or of church and church. Or of state and state. Everything is one. So *give to God glory and honor.*

Which is what the gospel says, though throughout the centuries both church and state have argued mightily that this is a proof-text for their separation. The question posed was: "Is it permissible to pay the poll tax to the Roman emperor or not?" Straightforward yes or no answer. Except that, if he gives it a straightforward answer, Jesus has played into their hands. And don't we know he's not about to do that! So he throws it back on them by asking his own simple question: "Who's the guy on the coin?" And not even bothering to point out that nobody has any pictures of God laying around. No mug shots on any money. But the presumption he makes, to which they can offer no rebuttals, is that they and everybody else knows what is owed to the invisible God. Can't be separated. Everything is one. So pay Caesar. But *give to God glory and honor.*

As Paul, who is writing to Gentiles in Thessalonika, says: "Dear sisters and brothers beloved by God, you are chosen." They're not members of any of those Twelve Tribes. They're not members of the local synagogue. They're not even Bar or Bat Mitzvahed. Not to worry. God is everywhere, belongs to everybody, and conversely, everybody belongs to God. Everything is one. *Give to God glory and honor.*

I hope all of you got the picture of the clergy from last week's ordination. Unitarian building, lots of so-called excommunicated priests (including one of the male gender), a Church of the Brethren minister and a Methodist one, and (un-photographed) an Orthodox bishop, would you believe! Also present in the assembly was at least one openly professed atheist (he is married to one of our priests). And everybody there absolutely knew we were all one. We *are* all one. We all belong to God, whoever or whatever definition we might give for God, which is simply our Christian name for that which is beyond all names, our all-inclusive term for the Source of All Being. To whom we know what we owe. *Give to God glory and honor.*

Just as we know we cannot separate the state out of all that. Because the nation in which we reside is just as much a part of the whole as are the nations in which our worldwide sisters and brothers reside.

Just as we know there are not two separate worlds in which we live: the sacred and the profane. Because everything belongs. Ergo everything is sacred. Unless or until we choose to profane it. But even then it belongs, because everything belongs. Everything is one.

And every ONE is responsible. What role are you called to, what must you give, in order to be faithful to who God is in your life? *Give to God glory and honor.*

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10.28.17 Homily

Thirtieth Ordinary

Exo 22:21-27; Ps 18:2-4,47,51; 1 Thes 1:5-10; Matt 22:34-40

*Elsie Hainz McGrath*

While the kids among us are wildly anticipating Halloween and probably having costume parties this weekend, during my growing-up years this was the weekend we celebrated the Protestant Reformation. I loved Reformation Sunday – not because I *actually* knew what we were celebrating, but because I knew what I had been *told* we were celebrating: namely, our superiority over the Catholics! And we always sang my favorite hymn: *Faith of our fathers, living still, in spite of dungeon, fire and sword. Oh how our hearts beat high with joy when ere we hear that glorious word. Faith of our fathers, living faith. We will be true to thee till death!* And, by the way, I always hated Halloween! I was a weird kid, and in some ways I've never outgrown that! Though, if we hadn't made it into the farce that it is, I'd probably be much more engrossed in the whole idea of the "night of the living dead." It's why we celebrate All Saints and All Souls, after all.

This year is particularly auspicious, because it is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the so-called beginning of the Reformation. The hero of the story, Martin Luther, nailed 95 theses onto the front door of the cathedral in Wittenburg, Germany – which of course the hierarchical church took exception to – and the conscientious young monk found himself OUT, excommunicated from the church that he loved and tried so fervently to bring reform to.

Some history. First of all, the Great Schism had already happened nearly 500 years before the so-called Reformation. That was when the first split occurred in Christianity – the split between the Church of the East (Orthodox) and the Church of the West (Roman). Once those who believed, as Luther did, that the Roman Church was in need of reform, had decided to accept that excommunication and become avowed Protestors, the term Protestant was crafted and we had three branches of Christianity. Today, as far as can be ascertained, those three have exponentially swelled to 43,000. There are 2.2 billion Christians in the world, claiming among themselves that Christianity means at least 43,000 different things. And if the world survives our asininity for that long, the projected number of Christian sects by 2025 is set at 55,000.

This year is auspicious for another anniversary of a reform movement, one that is trying mightily to hold on to its original mission of NOT being counted as sect number 43,001. This is the fifteenth year of Roman Catholic Womenpriests – *Roman* because we do NOT accept our excommunications. **We are working for reform from within.** It isn't easy, particularly because there are very few people who believe in our mission, even, appallingly, within our ranks and within our communities. And the more the hierarchical church insists we absolutely are *not* Roman, the more difficult it becomes to hold to our center. History bears this out, of course – none more graphically so than that Protestors Reformation movement which has become splintered into 43,000 different versions of protest over these past 500 years.

So what's the point of protesting? Anything? It's an unavoidable question, especially among protestors of all stripes. Where has the Civil Rights Movement gotten us in these past 50 years, for example? All the way to Ferguson, MO and even an openly bigoted so-called "leader" of the so-called "free world." How is the Apartheid movement holding in South Africa? What of the "never again" Holocaust? In the larger scheme of things, might seem like our 43,000 versions of Christianity is small potatoes. Except for the fact that, since the beginning of time, it is our *religion*... our particular *cultic* beliefs about *cosmic* questions... that determine how we treat each other and the Earth on which we all are living with every other life form we have not yet annihilated.

The most profound statement for world peace was written into the Law from a time as far back as 1350 BCE and is still quoted today: *You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, nor afflict the needy, nor extract usury or take advantage of anyone less fortunate than you.* The most perfect Law is found in every creedal statement of every major cultic religion from recorded history forward: *Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.* The most perplexing and persistent and pressing question for all time is *universal* for all of us. And very *particular* to each of us: *If not me, who? If not now, when?*

*O Living Presence, our strength, our source of light and truth, our freedom, may we be for others as you are for us. And may all peoples live in your truth, in the unity of peace forever. Amen.*

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