

When Church doesn't have a Building
Reflection for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shared Catholic Evening Prayer on September 27, 2020

EZ 18: 25-28

Phil 2:1-11

MT 21: 28-32

Back in June 2019, I stumbled upon an article calling for the Catholic Church to abandon its institutional structure and for Catholics to celebrate communion at home with family members, friends, and neighbors. In pre-pandemic times, such an idea was an interesting thought experiment, but completely unrealistic. Yet, here we are 15 months later worshipping from our dorm rooms and kitchen tables and attending church on Sundays officially is optional -- Cannon Memorial Chapel serves as a classroom rather than a worship space. The pandemic has challenged the very foundations of how we practice our traditions, and it has upset rituals we have taken for granted. We could put faith on pause and wait out the pain, uncertainty, and feelings of isolation until church goes back to normal, but I wonder if this is the opportune moment to reimagine our faith and make it stronger. Maybe this time away from the pews is a nudge from God to bring our faith into the world, just as the landowner asked his sons to work in the vineyard. Maybe this is an unexpected invitation to encounter God in the zoom room, the small moments of grace throughout our day, and quiet natural spaces like Westhampton Lake or the James River. Perhaps this time away is also an opportunity to notice that we actually miss church, that going to the Chapel at 5pm on Sundays isn't so much a chore, but a chance to renew and refresh at the start of the week. Attending Mass is our opportunity to enthusiastically say yes to God's invitation like the second son from the Gospel lesson...and it's good that we *say* yes, but how often do we continue on this path of the second son and forget to *act* on God's will in our everyday life? Are we bringing the spirit of aligning ourselves with God's will to the world? After saying yes and making a commitment to Christ in the church, are we following through with the hard, messy, exhausting work in the vineyard? How well do we live the challenging words heard in Philippians that "we must do nothing out of vainglory, rather humbly regard others as more important than ourselves, each looking out for not their own interests, but also those of others?" God is calling us to look inward and go outward to care for our common home and most vulnerable neighbors. We are called to question the very way we have been living our lives, acknowledging where we are complicit with injustice and perpetuating systems oppression without even realizing it. As Ezekiel said in the first reading, we must turn away from injustice to live fully. And we must be actively noticing these injustices in order to turn away from them. Accepting and following through with God's invitation to work in the vineyard is not easy because it takes both spiritual and physical endurance. But bringing our faith along with us out into the world will allow us to continuously realign our minds and hearts with God's will. If we recognize that working in the

vineyard not only puts us in the messiness of the world, but also in the deepest experiences of Christ-centered communities, the call to live compassionately overshadows what appears unfair in our individual lives.

At this very messy time in the world, we must follow Pope Francis' vision for a bruised and broken church that focuses its energy on accompanying those who are mourning and hurting in society. We must ask: How does our faith call us to be stewards of creation? What does it mean to practice our faith in the vineyard? Well, there are many tasks in this garden. We can sow seeds of social change by calling our local representative to pass a bill supporting principles in Catholic Social Teaching. We can nurture a supportive community here at Richmond by checking in with one another and friends who are doing the semester remotely. We can dig into complex issues of injustice through our diverse disciplinary perspectives. These are only a few of the many ways we are helping the vineyard thrive. By working in the vineyard together, we can cultivate lives of intentionality and hearts full of gratitude.

While we are living in a time of optional Sunday Mass, we must recognize our obligation to live out the Gospel, to practice corporal and spiritual works is more of a requirement than ever. Now is the time to lean into our faith, so that when the church does reopen, this physical gathering space, these weekly worships can give us space to reaffirm that we are indeed of one heart. This is an opportunity for our faith to transform into something that we both believe and do, and for the church building to become the place where we consciously say yes to God and find the strength to go back into the field to keep working for justice. When both our words and actions, our worship and our daily lives, are oriented towards Christ and serving others, we may realize a faith grounded both in and outside the church is not so radical after all.