



Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 4, 2020

* *Please stand if you are able*

Prelude

Gathering

Welcome and Lighting the Christ Candle

Acolyte: May the Holy Spirit unite us in worship, point us toward Jesus Christ, and inspire us to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God. Come, let us worship God.

* Liturgist: The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

All: Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

Liturgist: They have no speech, they use no words, no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out to all the earth, the words to the ends of world.

Psalm 19: 1-4

All: In that faith, let us worship the Lord our God. *Psalm 25: 1-3 adapted*

All Singing: 21 "This is My Father's World"

Minister: To God's people gathered in hope: Grace to you, mercy and peace, from God our Creator and Christ our Redeemer, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

Passing the Peace at a Distance

Reconciliation

Liturgist: The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

All: The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.

Liturgist: By the ordinances of the Lord your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

All: Lord, forgive our hidden faults. Keep your servants also from willful sins; may they not rule over us. *Psalm 19: 7-13 adapted*

Silent confession and reflection

All Singing: 639 “Lord, Have Mercy”

**Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy on me.
Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy on me.**

Liturgist: Being found in Christ we don't have a righteousness of our own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ – a righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

All: Therefore, I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow, attaining to the resurrection of the dead. *Philippians 3: 8-11 adapted*

* **All Singing: “Cornerstone”**

**My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly trust in Jesus' Name.**

***Christ alone, Cornerstone, weak made strong, in the Savior's love
Through the storm, He is Lord, Lord of all.***

**When darkness seems to hide His face, I rest on His unchanging grace.
In every high and stormy gale my anchor holds within the veil.
My anchor holds within the veil.**

**When He shall come with trumpet sound, Oh, may I then in Him be found,
Dressed in His righteousness alone, faultless stand before the throne.**

**His oath, His covenant, His blood, support me in the whelming flood.
When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay.**

*Edward Mote | Eric Liljero | Jonas Myrin | Reuben Morgan | William Batchelder Bradbury
© 2011 Hillsong Music Publishing*

Proclamation

All: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. *Psalm 19: 14 adapted*

Scripture: Matthew 21: 33-46

“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some

farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

“The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

“But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So, they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

“Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

“Therefore, I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: A Terrible Parable

* **All Singing: 876 “God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending”**

Dedication

Prayers of the People

* **All Singing: 965 “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow”**

* Benediction

Praying with Elders – If you have a concern or joy that you’d like to talk or pray about with an Elder, one or two will be available in the shade near the sanctuary entrance following the service.

Worship Leaders

Pianist/Vocalist: Erin Pacheco
Vocalists: Lisa & Karis Dykstra
Violinist: Frances Boerman-Cornell
Sound Engineer: Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister: Roger Nelson

9:00 AM Service

Acolyte: Evelyn Evenhouse
Liturgist: Steven Evenhouse
Prayer: Dave Larsen

10:15 AM Service

Acolyte: Bruno Brumirski
Liturgist: Rita Hollender
Prayer: Nate Pettinga

Text: Matthew 21: 33-46
Title: A Terrible Parable
Date: 10.04.20
Roger Allen Nelson

A friend's wife was gone for the weekend and Saturday with the kids had been long. Therefore, he decided on a movie, a big bowl of popcorn, and all the kids under a blanket on the couch as a way to ease on into bedtime. He pulled up a Disney-esque sports movie and thought everything was copacetic. But, then....

The coach for the antagonists launched into a pre-game pep talk. He worked himself into a lather yelling at how they needed to beat, crush, and destroy the opposing team of cute misfits. It was a stem-winder, setting the stage for the dramatic big game climax. The kids were wide eyed and worried. So, being a good dad, my friend said, "That's a really mean coach."

His third-grade son nodded in agreement, looked up with a furrowed brow, and said, "Yeah, he must be Jewish."

My friend's head spun around like Linda Blair in the Exorcist.
Gaack! Gasp! What?

He was trying to breath, stunned, knocked back, aghast!
His son had already returned to the movie....

Where in the world did that come from? They never said or thought such a thing at home. Did he pick something up in the neighborhood, or at his Christian grade school, or at Sunday school, or on television? Where in the world?

A little bit later, as he tucked his son into bed, not wanting to let this moment slip by and wanting to provide a clear corrective, my friend asked, "What made you think that mean coach was Jewish?" And, with a sort of innocent bewilderment the boy responded, "Well, they killed Jesus..."

This morning's text needs to be handled with great care. While it was important enough to be one of only three parables that show up in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is easily misread and oversimplified. As one biblical scholar puts it:

What began as a prophetic critique by a Jew to fellow Jews, designed not to damn Israel but to provoke repentance, in the course of Christian history, this passage and others like it became fuel for fires of anti-Semitism and Jews were reviled with the hated nickname "Christ killers...."

How then are we to read this parable?
What might it say to us?

Let's sit with this text for a moment.

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey – hailed as a king. When he went to the temple courts he made quite ruckus turning over the tables of the temple tax collectors and tossing out the benches where vendors sold doves and whatnot for religious ceremonies. When Jesus returned to the temple a day or two later the religious leaders were understandably unsettled.

So, they question Jesus, “By what authority do you do these things?” Jesus eventually responds that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the Kingdom of God before they would. Clearly, the tension was rising, and then Jesus launches into this parable.

He starts by plagiarizing Isaiah. In chapter 5 Isaiah likens Israel to a vineyard:

My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

The chief priests and elders would have known the reference - same image, same details, same language. This was right in their wheelhouse. And, the scenario was common place in Roman-occupied Palestine.

In the far-flung territories of the Empire absentee landowners would regularly leave tenants in charge of the productivity of the vineyard. These sharecroppers, in turn, would pay their rent with a share of the produce.

So, as a parable: so far, so good, business as usual.

The absentee landlord sends emissaries to check on the crop and collect the rent. The tenants kill the servants and for good measure send one back home beat and bloodied. The landlord reloads and does it again. This time more servants, more muscle. The same thing happens.

And, in response to this turn of events, the landlord sends his son. Maybe they will listen to him? Except, the tenants kill the son thinking that this will insure their place in the vineyard....

At this point we tend to think we've got the parable figured out. As a one-to-one allegory: You get the field as Israel, the wicked tenants as the religious authorities, the landowner's emissaries as the prophets, and Jesus as the son.

The parable, therefore, gets read as...

Salvation history in a nutshell.

Salvation history, the Cliff's Notes version.

And, I guess you could leave it there. Tidy little parable. The pieces easily fall into place. Jesus foreshadows his own death. This is the turning point toward the cross.

But, let's sit with this a little longer.

It turns out that a version of this parable appears in the Gospel of Thomas (one of the gospels that didn't make the cut). In that version the closing actions of the vineyard owner, destroying the tenants and giving the vineyard "to others," is omitted. Instead the parable ends with the tenants killing the owner's son and the question is "What will the vineyard owner do?"

We know what we would do: seek revenge.
But, what would vineyard owner do?

In our text, when Jesus asks what will the vineyard owner do, the priests and elders have a ready answer.

In first century Palestine, tenants who failed to turn over a portion of the crop could be removed from the land. And there's historical evidence that the landowning elite would pay to have delinquent or duplicitous tenants removed, sometimes by force if necessary. There were always other potential tenants eager to work the land.

In reality, many in Jesus' audience would have understood the experience of the farmers all too well. They knew, if they chose not to pay, the landowner would find new farmers.

And, at this point it's not Jesus who says that vineyard will be taken away and the wretches will be cast to a wretched end, it's the priests and elders.

Sometimes the parables of Jesus are categorized as "parables of grace" (prodigal son, lost coin, etc.) or "parables of judgment." This parable gets that distinction. It is often read as a parable of judgment, but part of what's lost in that broad stroke is the ridiculous actions by the absentee landowner.

Sending servants to check on the crop and collect the rent was a common practice, and even when the first emissaries are rebuffed it makes sense that a generous landowner might try again. Maybe there was a misunderstanding. But! But, to send your own son – given the cycle of violence? Who does that? That's a special kind of crazy....

Except that, Jesus doesn't highlight that act as foolish. This is not "the Parable of the Crazy Landowner." Rather, in an honor and shame culture, the landowner's decision to send his son as an emissary was appropriate since he could expect proper respect for his appointed heir.

There's a lot going on here. Across centuries and cultures, it's hard to come to a single simple reading. For example, some theologians think the priests and elders understand themselves as the landowners in story, and that throws the whole analogy sideways. Go figure....

So, dear friends, what are we to make of it?

It seems to me that when we get muddled in this bloody terrible parable as analogy and judgment we easily miss the heart of God in pursuit of his people. This was essentially written by a Jew, about a Jew, calling other Jews, to repentance and faithfulness.

But, what's lost in that reading is that the tenants could just as well be us. And, rather than seeing it as a parable of judgement, can we read it as a parable of grace? Can we catch a glimpse of the never-ending love of God who desires his people? Can we see here a God who loves, pursues, and goes to unthinkable lengths for you?

What if we read it with us as the tenants?

What if we're the share-croppers tending after the vineyard?

What would faithful work look like?

What would fruitfulness look like?

At the invitation of Thelma Hoogland, I was recently part of a SWIFT Zoom meeting. SWIFT is the Southwest Interfaith Team, an organization of churches, mosques, and synagogues in the southwest suburbs. I'd participated before; I recognized some people; and even through Zoom there was measure of friendship and the sharing of compassion between the children of Abraham.

It got me thinking about what kind of tenants we might be in this multi-cultural, multi-faith, multi-everything vineyard. In this historical moment as we wrestle with the meaning of black lives, as incidents of anti-Semitism have been on the rise for the last few years, as we are separated by a virus and how we respond to a virus, as political discourse seems to devolve into belligerence and bickering and broken relationships, what kind of tenants can we be?

Maybe the question of this parable is: In a vineyard of increased diversity and diminished resources how can we be good tenants? What is even one small thing that you can do in your neighborhood or circle of influence to produce fruits of the kingdom? More often than not the emissaries of God were calling Israel to faithfulness with regard to fidelity to God and being a blessing to others. May we hear the same this morning.

I don't have answers.

I have hopes and dreams.

Maybe you do too.

How we answer that question will shape Hope's collective future.

May we begin with a prayer repentance, hearts of openness, and the bounty of the vineyard.

For the son of the landowner is still seeking after the tenants.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.