

Pastor Joe Polzin
Matthew 21:33-46
“The Lord of the Vineyard”
Year A – Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 8, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

These ancient parables, one from our Old Testament reading, the other from our Gospel, were told seven centuries apart. And so impactful are they, that both of them are still echoing in our ears today. And at the time, their purpose was the same: that those who heard the parable would realize the tragic description of God’s faith-less people, that they would recognize their own sin, and repent. And yet all that occurred was a hardening of their sin-corrupted hearts.

The first parable was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, to the wayward nation of Israel. And it begins with a love song. A love song from God Himself, to His people, a recounting of all that He had done for them. The Israelites were God’s vineyard situated in the land He had promised them. And God did everything a loving caretaker could possibly do for His vineyard. He found the perfect spot on a fertile hill. He cleared it of all the stones, and planted the choicest vines. He built a watchtower to protect it from wild animals and thieves that would threaten its safety. He hewed a wine vat in anticipation of an abundant harvest, a harvest in response to the great love and care God had for them.

But when harvest time came, all that it yielded were wild grapes. And not just one time for one season, but again, and again, and again, year after year for centuries. And God asks His people, the vineyard itself, to judge: “And now, O inhabitant of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?” (Is. 5:3-4). And the crushing answer? Nothing. There is nothing left for God to do, except allow His vineyard, in its rebellion and sin, to be devoured by their enemies.

The second parable, which would have all the weight of the first behind it in the ears of its very learned-listeners, was spoken by Jesus to Israel’s religious leaders, the chief priests and elders (cf. Matt. 21:23). This time, the emphasis is on those who have been given the responsibility to take care of the vineyard that had been given to them by God, the responsibility to bear fruit as God’s people, the responsibility that those religious leaders knew fell upon them.

Again, we see a vineyard, beautifully cared for by the master, with a fence, and tower, and a winepress in anticipation of the harvest. And when harvest time came, the master sent the servants to get the fruits. But, they were not able to get the fruits of the vineyard. Rather, what they got was to be gotten. They were beat, killed, and stoned. Jesus was describing how Israel had treated all those messengers of God, the prophets, and how Israel, in their stubbornness and idolatry, would kill anyone who tried to convince them to turn from their sin. Jesus himself would later lament, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” (Matt. 23:37)

So, the master said, “I know what I’ll do, I’ll send my Son. They will respect my Son.” But instead, in the utter depth of wickedness and depravity, “when the tenants saw the Son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him” (21:38-39).

And again, the parable is meant to convict, and illicit a reaction of repentance from its hearers. And Jesus pointedly asks them, “When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what

will he do to those tenants?” (21:40) And again, the crushing answer, the inescapable truth is the only thing those religious leaders could have said, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons” (21:41).

In neither parable was the fate of those who had so despised the master of the vineyard in question. In fact, everyone quite agreed that God’s righteous judgment was indeed necessary and just. The question was, “What would they do about it?” The chief priests and Pharisees, perceiving that Jesus was speaking about them, wanted to arrest him right then and there, but couldn’t, for fear of the people who held Jesus in high regard. But in a short few days, we see that this parable also functions as a tragic prophecy.

You see, in Matthew chapter 21, Jesus had just ridden into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And in only a few short days, those religious leaders, the “tenants” in Jesus’ parable, were about to take the Master’s Son out of the vineyard, out of Jerusalem, and kill him. Instead of repenting, these leaders only hardened their sin-corrupted hearts.

So, what do make of these parables? Well, in one way, these parables are not for us. Isaiah’s parable was one spoken to the idolatrous nation of Israel in the Old Testament, to prepare them for the judgment of God they were about to receive, the destruction of Jerusalem and their exile from Israel. Jesus’ parable was one spoken to the religious institution at the time, who had led the people as faithless shepherds to the point where they couldn’t even recognize the promised Messiah in their midst. Neither of these two things are our sin.

However, in another way, as I mentioned earlier, these parables still echo in our ears today for a reason, because we are the Church, the new Israel, joined by Baptism to our Lord and his family, and the recipients of God’s covenantal promises given once to Israel, and now to us through Christ. And God’s kingdom is no longer geographically or politically-oriented, it resides in His kingdom, and in His whole creation. The whole earth is His. And we are His people.

And so we ask ourselves, do *we* bear the fruit that God expects from His people today, from His Church? Or, are we in rebellion of God’s care and provision, and reject Him as the “Lord of the vineyard”?

In the recent weeks, it seems the burden of a fallen, sin-infested world has felt particularly crushing. The devastating effects of forces of nature, like hurricanes, flooding, and fires. The horror and terror caused by a man deranged enough to open fire in the middle of a music concert. The complete inability for our national leaders to speak in any ways other than viciously and full of vitriol.

And what are these things except symptoms of sin? That sin, which as Paul says in Romans 7, we find is the sin which dwells within me (v. 17). The sin in the world is our sin, which, since the Garden of Eden, has caused enmity between humanity and creation, where even God’s creation in nature, meant for perfection and good, is raging against us. Our sin which can’t spot, much less help, someone in such a state of mind, that he thinks taking the lives of others is an acceptable course of action. Our sin which encourages and reinforces, with our money and our attention, our political and media system to perform and act the way it does.

We as God’s people hardly see all that God has done for us, neither do we acknowledge in thanksgiving and praise His provision, and bear fruit as we should. At *best*, we the Church are absent, slinking away from our responsibilities to be a city on a hill, a light in this world, blending in so that the world, who rejects God as Lord and Master, can’t tell the difference between us and everyone else, because the last thing we want is to stand out. At *worst*, however, we the Church are guilty of the same sin we see in this world, a rejection of God and the inability

to bear fruit, as we take for granted that which God gives us, and turn away from the hand that faithfully provides for us.

We *are* guilty in sin, each one of us, individually in our own ways, and collectively as part of this fallen world. And unless we, in repentance, acknowledge our sin, acknowledge like the hearers of the parables did, that we deserve nothing but God's fair judgment and "a miserable death" ... we should expect nothing except the same fate that Israel and its religious leaders wished upon themselves with hard hearts – God's handing them over to that which they deserved.

When we acknowledge our sin, and repent before God, when we are, in fact, broken to pieces by the Cornerstone as we fall upon it (Matt. 21:44), something amazing and unexpected happens. We see, as Jesus says, that the Cornerstone is the "Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes" (Matt. 21:42). You see, the Lord of the vineyard knew, when He sent His Son, that His Son would fare no better than His previous servants, the prophets. He desired that His Son would be respected, but it came as no surprise to Him that His Son was sinfully thrown out of the vineyard, and killed. And in perfect obedience, obedience that neither Israel nor we could afford, the Son submitted to His Father's will.

And "the stone that the builders rejected, has become the Cornerstone" (v. 42). Because the Son did not remain dead, but was raised to life again by the Father. And when those who had a hand in killing the Son, including ourselves because of our sin that nailed him to the cross, when we saw that he did not stay dead, but defeated our sin and death, it was indeed "marvelous in our eyes." We see the risen Son, and instead of death and condemnation, which we deserve, we are now given forgiveness and life.

It's an amazing exchange. And it's what enables us, by the undeserved grace and compassion our God continually gives to us, to bear the fruit as we should. Not perfectly, for which we need to continually repent and ask for forgiveness. As Martin Luther said in the very first one of his 95 theses, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

We bear fruit in our lives not to earn salvation, but in repentance, we bear fruit because our salvation has already been earned for us by Jesus, and our lives are therefore fruitful. Our works are never for our own benefit, we need nothing after all that God gives us. But our fruitful lives are to the glory of God and the benefit of our neighbor. Are those around us seeing how we, imperfect as we are, are living in a way that is 100% different than this world, because we live in the light of God's grace?

And God's grace enables us to live as Paul puts it in our Epistle Reading—he writes, "Not that I have already obtained [God's salvation and the promise of the resurrection,] or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12-14).

We press on, as God's forgiven people, in light of all that God has done for us. He has planted us, pruned us, and prepared us for the life He has given. And we bear fruit, not because we are able to make our hearts produce fruit on its own, but because Christ Jesus came to make *us* his own. And we hear his promises of eternal life, and his promises that, we too, will be raised from the dead like him, which prompts us to strain forward, even while living in a world filled with pain, and suffering, and sin. Because we know, without a doubt, that God's own Son, Jesus Christ, has overcome this world by his death and resurrection. And we await the day when he

will return and reveal his victory in full to his vineyard, bringing his fruitful harvest home in eternal peace and joy forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.