

“Who Will Bear Fruit?”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
World Communion Sunday – October 5, 2014

**Matthew 21: 33-46**

Even though it is the first Sunday of October, I want you to pretend that it is Holy Week. No, I haven't lost my mind – not yet, anyway! I want you to imagine it's Holy Week because that is the context of our passage from Matthew. Yes, the calendar may say it's the beginning of fall, but for the purposes of our story today, Jesus has just entered the Holy City of Jerusalem after Palm Sunday.

Rev. Dock Hollingsworth describes it this way: *It is festival season in Jerusalem and the last thing the chamber of commerce wants is a riot, a scene, a disturbance. During the season of Passover, the crowds – carrying their sacks and luggage and provisions – are gathered from all across the region, and it is important to the festival committee that everything goes smoothly.*

*Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been making his way to Jerusalem where the final scenes of the great drama will play out. Matthew keeps building the tension and the soundtrack keeps getting louder. Just before entering the city, Jesus declares there is going to be a disturbance. “See, we are going to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priest and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised” (20:18-19) (“Trouble at the Festival,” [day1.org/6136-trouble\\_at\\_the\\_festival](http://day1.org/6136-trouble_at_the_festival)).*

This context helps us to better understand Jesus' parable. It is a true allegory, a story used to symbolize characters or events in real life. In this case, God is represented by the landowner; the Jewish religious leaders – who didn't want the festival season to be disrupted – are the tenant farmers; the Old Testament prophets are the landowner's representatives to collect what was due; Jesus is the landowner's son; and the church is the new group invited to produce fruits of the kingdom.

Jesus uses this parable to do exactly what he did throughout Holy Week: stir things up and be the prophet God needed him to be, before facing his final fate. In the atmosphere of those days, Jesus brought to light how the Jewish religious establishment had turned away from God, seeking power and authority for themselves, rather than serving God's people and God's purposes. God sent them prophets, but they “seized (them) and beat one, killed another, and stoned another” (21:35). God sent more messengers to Israel, begging them to repent and turn back to their Creator, “but they greeted them in the same way” 21:36).

Finally, God sent his only Son, who he believed they would respect, follow, and to whom they would truly listen. Instead, the heir of the landowner was thrown out of the vineyard, and was killed like the others (21:38-39).

One commentator notes: *Embedded within this parable of rejection of and deadly violence against the landowner's son is the reminder that the heart of faith is relationship with Jesus. The tenants did not seize and kill an idea, a principle, or a system of doctrine. They seized and killed the landowner's son. The gospel comes to us as a PERSON* (Andrew Purves, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 142).

God knew the risk of sending his only Son in human form. God had seen how humanity had treated his other messengers. But God freely chose to come to this world in flesh and blood, to risk his heir's fortune, solely out of love for the world. God knew the risk. But that did not stop God from choosing to love us unconditionally in Jesus Christ.

Our faith as Christians is not solely rooted in ideas or beliefs or words on a piece of paper. Ultimately, at its core, our faith is rooted in a person. It is rooted in the knowledge that God influences, changes, and impacts the world through human relationships. Why? Because God chose to interact, to laugh, to cry, to listen, to teach, to admonish, and to embrace through a human relationship in Jesus Christ.

I'm sure it would be tempting to write this parable off as an historical story that only applied to Jesus' setting. But that would be a mistake. For one thing, Jesus makes clear in the parable that there is an expectation that a new group will come and bear fruit from the vineyard – fruits of the kingdom. Guess what? That's us. And so, in reading this parable for today's world, how are we doing when it comes to bearing fruits for God's kingdom? Are we doing everything we can to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, teach the masses, visit the imprisoned, welcome the stranger, and love the unwanted? How are we being an active part of the coming kingdom God is forming? There's a bumper sticker that reads, "The world you desire comes not by chance but by change." What a huge difference one letter makes! Instead of waiting for God to change the world – and leave things to chance – we are called to actively change the world as God's ambassadors of grace. And in fulfilling that call, we will bear fruit that will please the landowner immensely.

The other lesson I take from this story for today is about rejection. Throughout the parable, God is rejected through human relationships, and there is a hope and expectation at the end that humanity will choose to not reject God but embrace God and God's kingdom. On the surface, we may not think that we reject God in our daily lives of faith. And yet, how often do we ignore an email from a friend in need, or not

answer the phone because of the number on caller ID, or label a neighbor or bystander as strange based on their outward appearance? Our faith is a faith rooted in relationship. What did Jesus say elsewhere? “When you did it to the least of these, you did it to me” (Matthew 25: 31-46). How do we refuse the temptation to reject others, so that the fruits of God’s kingdom might come forth abundantly?

As I shared in an email to the congregation on Monday, the Rev. Fernando Rodriguez shared with Iglesia Nueva Creación last Sunday that he will be leaving at the end of December. This was a mutual decision between Fernando and the Presbytery of Whitewater Valley, and it reflects changing needs that are present for the Hispanic congregation at this particular time, and how Fernando is unable to meet those changing needs due to his family situation right now. Fernando and Kecelyn and their children will be supported during this transitional time, as will Iglesia Nueva Creación. We do not know what the future holds for both, but we entrust all of this to God’s care and guidance, discerning what is next for us all.

Fernando shared in his email to John Knox that when he and Kecelyn arrived here five years ago, they were skeptical about us. They had been wounded deeply by their previous church in New Jersey, where their Hispanic congregation was also in a “nesting” situation, similar how it has been here. In Fernando’s words: “Unfortunately, the host congregation made our pastor and every one in our church feel like dirt. And that’s putting it lightly. We were wounded, and we were afraid that something like that could happen to us again. Thank God we were wrong. The love and respect that you all have shown us have healed those wounds and strengthened us to love you all back the same way.

He continues: “I am grateful for the leadership of John Knox that saw me from day one not only as a colleague, but more importantly, as a human being. I am grateful for how you all and the people of Nueva Creación have grown to become full partners in ministry. Although all of that is fantastic, what I am most grateful for is the relationships we have formed with you all. The love you all have shown us during this time has certainly given us a lot of hope for the future of the church and a fresh perspective of what is possible when we love one another.”

That is what God has done through you to beat back the pain of rejection. As your pastor, I thank you for loving Fernando and Kecelyn and their family, and all our brothers and sisters in Christ from Nueva Creacion, as God has loved us in Jesus Christ. May we never leave it to chance, but only seek the change God requires to bring about the kingdom here and now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.