

## To Live or To Die

Matthew 21:33-44

### Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

October 8, 2017 – Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. According to the last two verses of this morning's Gospel, there are only two alternatives to choose from in life. One is that you be led by the Holy Spirit to a broken-hearted, repentant faith in Jesus as Lord, and the other is that you elect to hard-heartedly turn your back on Him. In like fashion there are only two alternatives in death. You can die now in the death of Jesus and live forever, or you can die apart from Jesus, and die forever. There are simply no other options either in life or in death. And that brings us to this morning's Parable concerning a certain landowner who had set up a vineyard – dug the soil, planted the plants, built a protective wall around it, dug the winepress, and erected a watchtower. Then he was called away – where, we're not told. But before leaving, he rented out his vineyard to some tenant farmers who were to weed, feed, water, pick the fruit, and give the landowner his fair share. Everything else had already taken care of.

But when the owner of the vineyard sent servants to collect his due, they bullied one servant, beat another, and killed a third. Now I understand landlords and tenants often don't see eye to eye, and that most renters would rather be owners. But, if you own property, all the attendant problems that go along with any profit you might enjoy are yours as well. Yet, whether you'd prefer to be an owner or a renter, as far as life here is concerned, all of us are ultimately renters. God is the Landowner, and we're dependent on Him for all things. He gives us clothing, shoes, food, drink, house, home, our reason, and all our senses. He gives us His Word – and in it you have life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins. He also gives us His Holy Spirit, the Church, Absolution, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper – not to mention His promise to grant you eternal life and raise you on the Last Day. Finally, He gives you the means to live fruitfully and productively – to serve both Him and your neighbor with the overflow of His tender care and mercy.

And God is really quite stubborn when it comes to handing out His mercy as He continues giving it even when you're ungrateful or hostile to His giving. In this Parable the tenants beat and killed their Land-

lord's servants, yet He continued to send more – indeed, He did something even crazier – He sent his Son! When they saw Him, they seized the opportunity and took His life – believing crazily that if He was out of the picture the inheritance would be theirs. They figured if the Landowner wasn't coming back and His Son out of the picture, the land would revert to whomever had a claim on it at the time – which would have been them – or so they thought. So they took the Son, threw Him over the wall of the vineyard, and killed Him.

It was at that point in the Parable where Jesus posed this question. He asked: "When the Owner of the vineyard comes, what will He do to those tenants?" But the question behind the question was this: "What will God do with those who despise His grace, act as if His gifts were their own, and kill both His servants and His Son?" Of course the answer He received was the obvious one – an answer which runs in the way of the Law – "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." God would do to the tenants what they had done to His servants and His Son – and after that He would rent the vineyard to others who would give Him His fruit in due season. Isn't that what you'd do if you were the Landowner? Wouldn't you prosecute those scoundrels to the fullest extent of the law, evict them, throw them into prison, and try to find better tenants?

If that's what you would do, then consider who this Parable is really talking about – God's people, Israel, whom God set free from the bondage of Egypt, and brought safely through the wilderness and the Red Sea – the ones to whom He had given Canaan as an inheritance. He had given them the worship of His Name, the Tabernacle, the Temple, the Covenant, the Sacrifices and the Priesthood. He sent prophets to preach His Word to them, but they rejected, despised, imprisoned, beat and killed them. And all this they did right up until that moment when God decided to send His own beloved Son – and they killed Him, too!

What do you suppose God will do with you, His people of the end times? After all, He planted and protected His Church as a vineyard. He sent prophets, Apostles, and evangelists to preach His Holy Scriptures to you – pastors to distribute His gifts and teach

you by means of His Word how to live as the free, forgiven children of God. He gave you new life in the waters of Holy Baptism and reconciled you both to Himself and one another in the forgiveness of your sins. As often as you want it God stands ready to feed you with the Living Bread of His very own body and to nourish you with His own life-giving blood.

And what do you do? Like Israel of Old, you push Him out of His own vineyard, shut your Bibles, your ears, your heart and your mind to His Word, and then you close your mouth to His Supper. On any given Sunday morning most barely give themselves more than an hour to receive the gifts He brings. In far too many places the Sabbath *day* of Old Testament times has now given way to one sweet *hour* of prayer – and not one minute longer! Some, as St. Paul warned, have turned to serve a belly god instead of the true God, and in that turning have made themselves enemies of the cross. And when you turn your back on the gifts God offers in the cross of His Son, you are crucifying Him all over again!

So, this Parable is a stern warning for you to use Christ and His gifts or risk losing everything – lest the kingdom of God be taken away from you and given to others. This Parable was spoken to warn the Jews that they were about to be served an eviction notice. The reign of God would soon be taken from them and given to others – to the Gentiles – to you and to me. You see, God had given His Israel a trust, a stewardship to be a light shining in the darkness to guide others to the worship of the one true God. But instead of being a light to the Gentiles, Israel chose to darken God's light with idolatry and faithlessness. Instead of good grapes, our Lord found sour grapes. Rather than faith, He found unbelief.

Today you also have a stewardship – a sacred trust from our Lord that you freely receive the gifts Jesus died to give us all – and that you proclaim His saving death with your lips and lives until He comes again on the Last Day. The Church doesn't exist only for Her own life and the life of Her people, but for the life of the world – so that all might trust in Christ for life and salvation. You aren't here today to receive only for yourself. You're here so that you can take something from this place and bring to others the saving presence of Jesus – for to refuse and reject God's beloved Son and His gifts is to live with a great weight hanging over your head – the very real possibility that God might just decide to take His gifts elsewhere.

That's why daily and continually you need to pray: "Thy kingdom come." Indeed, as Luther re-

minds us in the *Small Catechism*, God's kingdom doesn't need your prayers in order for it to come, but **you** need to pray that this kingdom will come **among us** – that God would preserve **us** as faithful tenants in His vineyard – that He would continue to send **us** His Spirit, preach His Word, and royally reign over us by Jesus' death and resurrection – and all so that we might cling to Christ and lead lives that honor Him. Jesus, as the beloved Son of the Landowner, is the One whom the tenants cast out of the vineyard and put to death on a cross. He was despised and rejected by His own people who thought they were doing God a favor by killing Him.

When you think about it, though, in an upside-down, backward sort of way, the wicked tenants were right all along in their belief that if they killed the son, the inheritance would be theirs. To be sure, it is solely because of the death of God's Son that the inheritance has now gone to those who least deserve it. Precisely because Jesus died, you are now able to be called a child of God. So, returning to Jesus' question: What is it the divine Landlord will do with those wicked tenants? Will He put them to a wretched end as the Pharisees suggested? Hear again the prayer Jesus prayed as He was dying: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Listen to Peter's words at Pentecost: "God made this Jesus, **whom you crucified**, both Lord and Christ." When the people who heard it cried out in terror, saying: "What shall we do?" Peter replied: "Repent and be Baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."

Jesus said: "He who falls on this Stone rejected by the builders of Israel will be broken to pieces, but he on whom It falls will be crushed." Dear friends, if you fall on Jesus and acknowledge your sin, you too will be broken to bits – but you'll also be raised to life again in the power of our Lord's resurrection. On the other hand, if you stubbornly resist and refuse to be broken – if you try to protect yourself against God – you'll be crushed. Your only options, then, are that you be broken on Jesus or crushed resisting His will to save you. This morning God is holding before us all both a warning and a promise. Do not take the gifts of our Lord lightly or refuse the Son who comes to you from the Father in blessing. And most of all, do not be offended by the Son who was killed by the wicked tenants. Baptized into His death and believing on His name, both the vineyard and the kingdom are now yours by right – because in Jesus you are the Lord's. "The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes." Amen.