

Matthew 21 33-46

³³JESUS SAID, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." ⁴²Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Good morning, and Happy October! We are now in the last quarter of this unforgettable (or maybe forgettable) calendar year - we're coming into the homestretch. We can see the finish line to 2020! ☺ And since it's October and we just saw the Harvest Moon a few days ago, maybe it's fitting that this morning we have a parable that talks about the harvest.

This morning's parable from Matthew is a very vivid one. Once we understand who each of the characters in the parable represents, it is fairly easy to understand, and whether we've ever worked in a vineyard or not, it should stir a reaction in all of us. The people who heard Jesus tell this parable were very familiar with the imagery of the vineyard symbolizing God's kingdom. This imagery was well known to Jesus' listeners, as it was used by Isaiah in chapter 5,

verses 1-7. Isaiah wrote these verses some 700 years before Jesus told his parable. I encourage you to read this for yourselves again, when you get a chance, but let me read it to you now:

¹Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.
²He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.
³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.
⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?
⁵And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.
⁶I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.
⁷For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
righteousness, but heard a cry!

In that last verse - verse 7 - Isaiah explains that the vineyard of the LORD is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his delightful plant. God's people are compared to a vineyard which He owned and cultivated, but which did not bear good fruit. In Isaiah's passage, God is disappointed in the results of his efforts, because the wild grapes are worthless. [We have wild grapes that grow along Tucker Road, and they taste awful.] The fruit that He had expected was the sweet fruit of repentance - the fruit of justice and righteousness, but instead the vine only bore the bitterness of bloodshed and distress.

The opening verse of Jesus' parable in this morning's passage contains numerous striking similarities to Isaiah's song in 5:1-7 that seem unlikely to be purely coincidental. In Jesus'

parable, as in Isaiah's, the vineyard is the nation of Israel, and God is represented as the landowner and the one who planted and developed the vineyard with great care.

But from there, Jesus' parable takes a slightly different path than Isaiah's. In Jesus' parable, the owner, instead of tending to the vineyard himself, leases it to others to operate it for him, and goes away as an absentee landlord. The concept of an absentee landlord leasing a vineyard to tenants was not at all uncommon in those days. The tenants represent Israel's religious leaders - chief priests, scribes, elders, and Pharisees - who have assumed a responsibility to the owner of the vineyard to provide some agreed-upon portion of the vineyard's harvest to the owner each year in exchange for the privilege of operating the vineyard and making a nice living on it.

The lease agreement could really be a pretty good deal for the tenant, because the arrangement would typically allow for a split of the harvest yield, so whatever the agreed-upon split might be, there was incentive for the tenants to work hard and maximize the yield of the harvest. A good tenant would recognize and appreciate the opportunity that the landowner had provided, and would work hard to ensure the best possible yield at harvest time, so that he could honor his agreement with the landowner and get the greatest return for himself as well.

In Jesus' parable, these tenants may have put a lot of effort into working the vineyard, and presumably had a harvest of some measure to share - Jesus doesn't say - but regardless, when it comes time to settle the account with the landowner, the tenants want no part of it. The landowner sends his slaves to collect the payment that is due from the tenants, and instead of making the payment in the amount that had been agreed upon, the tenants mistreat and kill the slaves. This happens again and again.

Time after time, over centuries, God patiently sent his prophets to Israel, one after another, to exhort the people to provide God's share of the vineyard's harvest. But one after another, those prophets were rejected by the people. Jeremiah was beaten. Zechariah was killed between the temple and the altar. Isaiah, according to tradition, was sawn in two by King Manasseh. John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod. "We don't want to hear these prophets' messages. We may give outward appearances to the contrary, but inside, we don't want to give God what He is due. We want to keep the entire harvest - righteousness, praise, honor and glory - for ourselves."

Most vineyard owners facing a similar situation would have taken action to evict the tenants long before this point, but God is exceedingly patient. In fact, after the severe mistreatment of his slaves, God sends His very own Son to them. And they do the same thing to him, casting him out and killing him.

Isaiah 5:3 says "judge between me and my vineyard" -- God is telling the people of Israel that it is so clear that the vineyard's wild grapes are worthless, He is willing to let them serve as judge for themselves. Similarly, Jesus asks his listeners to decide what the judgment should be for the wicked tenants, for selfishly withholding what was properly due the landowner, and for their cruel and heinous mistreatment of his slaves and his son. The case is so clear-cut, there's no question what it will be. This is a judgment of themselves, and they judge rightly.

Justice demands that the tenants be punished harshly, and removed from the vineyard. The landowner will replace them with new tenants - tenants who are hand-selected from across the world to produce great harvests of fruit, and joyfully give the landowner his share: justice and righteousness, prayer and praise, thanks, adoration, worship, honor and glory. The new tenants will be those who respect and honor the Son.

Our first inclination is to think about this parable in its most obvious sense, as Jesus' warning of God's impending judgment against Israel, and as a foreshadowing of God's replacement of Israel with His Church. It is a warning to any nation that does not honor the one true God; God will have patience, but inevitably there will come a time for judgment. Further, it serves as a caution to us - His Church - that we never neglect to give Him the honor due His name.

Yet there may be another way to think about it as well: on an individual level. God has developed a beautiful vineyard in each of our hearts, and gives each of us the privilege of operating it as the tenant - the steward - of the vineyard we've been put in charge of. But by nature, man is not submissive to God. By nature, we are inclined to be selfish; we prefer to worship ourselves first and God second (or not at all). We do not willingly turn over to Him that which He is due. Instead, we want to tell ourselves how wonderful we are, enjoy the fruits we have produced, and bask in the praise, honor and glory for ourselves. This parable is a call for each of us to assess ourselves individually and proclaim judgment. It is not until our nature is removed from the vineyard of our heart and the Holy Spirit is installed as its tenant that our heart starts to produce the true spiritual fruit of repentance that God expects. Let us not hesitate to give Him the fruits of the harvest that we owe Him.

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer." - Psalm 19:14

Amen.