



Pentecost 18-October 4, 2020

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Matthew 21:33-46

"Tombstone to Cornerstone"

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Jesus said to the people. "Listen to another parable." Whenever Jesus tells a parable, Jesus does this to see who will hear what he has to say. Many times, the parables of Jesus end with him declaring, "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen." But more often than not, the number of ears to hear, those that are listening, are few. You would think that Jesus would have given up on this what seems to be an ineffective teaching method and try a new way so that more people would listen and understand. You would think that Jesus would teach simply by saying what he wanted to say rather than tell a parable. Jesus is speaking to several people today and among the crowd of hearers are the chief priest and elders who had just questioned where Jesus received his authority. Their ears perked up when Jesus told the parable of the landowner and the vineyard.

Using a vineyard as an illustration was not new to these religious leaders. They would have been familiar with the first lesson for today from Isaiah, where the prophet is singing a love-song concerning his vineyard. This reading begins with God breaking out in song telling of the love he has for his chosen people Israel and he uses the vineyard to describe his chosen people. But as you heard, this love song turns into a lament when God sees that his vineyard produced wild grapes instead of sweet grapes. The landowner cries out, "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?" The reading ends with the vineyard being taken apart piece by piece by the landowner representing God who created it.

These religious leaders are happy with the beginning of Jesus' parable. They could relate to the vineyard image that Jesus was creating. They understood the process of planting a vineyard. They understood the importance of protecting this vineyard by putting a fence around it. They knew the necessity of building a winepress to process the grapes. They appreciated that Jesus remembered to build the watchtower to store the ripe grapes in the lower level and also having a second story to watch for anyone who wanted to come and steal the produce of the vineyard. Their ears were open to hearing about the vineyard, but their ears weren't interested in hearing about the return of the absentee landowner.

They failed to hear what the absentee landowner had done for them. The landowner was the one who planted the vineyard. It was the landowner who built the fence. The landowner dug in the winepress and built the watchtower. This landowner was not like most of the absentee landowners we know who simply own the land, but expect the tenants to provide everything else and then agree on equitable terms to receive a share of the crop for providing the seed, caring for the crop throughout the growing season, and providing the harvesting

equipment and storing the produce of the land away safely. The tenants in this parable only remember the work that they had done and when the landowner returned to collect the produce of HIS vineyard, they are not willing to let go of what they think belongs to them.

Much like the love song turning sour in the reading from Isaiah, this parable also goes bad when it comes time for the harvest. The landowner first sent his slaves to collect his produce, but instead of the tenants giving the slaves even a share of the produce, they got rid of the slaves one by one. Next, the landowner decided to increase his chances of collecting his produce by sending more slaves than before only to have more of his slaves beaten, killed and stoned and again receiving no share of what belonged to him. The landowner doesn't seem to use good judgement in his next move. Instead of the landowner calling in an army of soldiers to use power to take what is his, he believes that the tenants will respect his son and sends him alone to collect the produce of the vineyard. The tenants don't no longer fear the landowner, so they kill the landowner's son with the intention of stealing the son's inheritance.

After laying out this parable, Jesus asks the chief priests and Pharisees what they expect the landowner might do when he comes. They fall right into the trap that Jesus had been setting for them. Jesus had opened their ears wide in telling this parable and when they confessed the landowner would put the miserable wretches to death, they knew that Jesus had been talking about them. Therefore, Jesus taught using parables. Instead of outright accusing the chief priests and Pharisees of not listening to prophets who had been sent to them, they confessed to Jesus that they were among those who didn't listen to the message of the prophets about the coming messiah. Then Jesus turns up the heat, by saying to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?" The chief priests and Pharisees now heard that Jesus who's coming was told by prophet after prophet was now standing before them and speaking to them. They were rejecting the stone that would become the cornerstone of something new. No longer would inheritance into God's kingdom be earned by work in the vineyard. Inheritance would now be given to the workers in the vineyard by sending God's only son to be put to death. But the son's tombstone would not be the end of the story. This tombstone would become the cornerstone that God's chosen people would place their faith.

You and I are no different than the chief priests and Pharisees that Jesus was speaking to. It is our first instinct, it is our sin, to forget the landowner who has provided everything for us. It is our desire to show that we have done something to receive God's inheritance of forgiveness and eternal life. But for this very reason, God chose to send his son to be killed. And by his death, instead of us taking the inheritance as workers in the vineyard, we receive it by God's mercy. And this was all a part of God's divine plan.

It is good today to receive the Lord's supper once again. You come to the table reminded that you have earned nothing that you will receive. You have rejected the stone that became the cornerstone. The tombstone of Jesus has become the cornerstone, the foundation for your inheritance. The blood of Christ that was shed, was shed for you. The inheritance is yours. Amen.