

Pentecost 19-October 8, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Matthew 21:33-46

“This was the Lord’s Own Doing”

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

Did you hear the similarities between the first reading from Isaiah and the gospel reading for today? You should have and so did the audience that Jesus was preaching that were listening in the gospel reading for today. Jesus had done just what we do in every Sunday worship service. We read scriptures that were spoken by the Lord years ago and then we deliver a sermon that is intended to both convict you of your sins and then free you from them with the gospel. The crowd that Jesus was specifically intending to hear his message to be the religious leaders. They too were familiar with the reading from Isaiah that uses the metaphors of vineyards and stones. The religious leaders had heard this story before, but as educated as they were, they did not yet understand what they meant for them. Jesus uses this story about vineyards and stones and tells it in the form of a parable. In the recent string of parables, I have often commented on how the usual result after Jesus tells a parable is that some hear and understand, and others remain confused. However, when Jesus tells this parable, we learn in the end of his sermon that the religious leaders, the chief priests, and the Pharisees, have no trouble understanding that Jesus was talking about them.

There is little question about who the owner of the vineyard in these two lessons is. It is God himself. He is the one who cleared the land of stones before planting the vineyard. God intended for his vineyard to be more successful than Prairie Berry is in our state. The owner didn’t start with cheap vines. He planted a choice of vines. Fully expecting grapes to be harvested, he protected his investment by building a watchtower to guard against anyone who might steal from him or damage what he started. From the beginning, he got ready for harvest by building the wine vat. The owner of the vineyard had watched every YouTube video available on making a productive vineyard. He looked at what he had done and said, “What more is there to do that I haven’t already done?”

Maybe you have had that kind of experience when you think you have prepared so completely for something so that you felt all that remained was to reap the rewards, but then a curve ball is thrown your way that makes you want to throw in the towel and never look back on what you worked so hard to be a success. It sounds like the vineyard owner did just that when he went to harvest his high-quality grapes and discovered they were all wild grapes that could not be used for anything. Whatever he built, he tore down. The vineyard owner made sure that no one else would take it over and try to make it successful. He prayed that no rain would fall, and it would be overgrown with weeds so that no one would ever use that land again.

As seems obvious, the owner of the vineyard could be none other than the Lord. And the vineyard that he hoped would bear fruit, he identifies as his chosen people, the Israelites. Why had God’s chosen people, the choice grapes that he planted, bear wild grapes instead? What had the Lord missed and done wrong? That was the opening line from one of my district sales managers that I had worked with when I was in the seed business. When he would come along with me to make a service call to a customer who had an issue with what happened in his field after it was planted, and before they had a chance to blame the seed, my sales manager would say, “So what do you think you did wrong?” Most of my customers knew him and would

laugh. Those who didn't know him, didn't think it was so funny. Just like in the story of the owner of the vineyard, the problem usually wasn't what the landowner had failed to do.

This is where Jesus takes the scripture from Isaiah and makes it clear to his audience where the problem comes from. You have likely heard the phrase that possession is 9/10 of the law. This may have had a greater validity 2000 years ago. These people who did the work while the owner was absent thought, they should become the owners. You can see this law about possession play out when one toddler takes away a toy that belongs to his or her sibling. If it is in my hands, it's mine to play with. Prisons have many residents who learned the hard way that there is no law like this. You can't just take what wasn't yours to begin with.

This is what God's chosen people had done. They had received a promise from the Lord that they would be given the promised land. After receiving this gift, they insisted they must do something to make sure they had earned the gift. This is what the law always does. It demands something from you that you can't give. They were unwilling to simply receive the gift so they felt if they killed off the prophets who came to deliver the same promise again and again, they could have some skin in the game and legally take some ownership of what was given to them. But the landowner didn't change his message based on how his messengers were treated. Then the tenant got wind that the landowner was going to send his son. The tenants rationalized that the son was the only thing standing between them and receiving the full inheritance, so they did the same to the son as they had done to the previous messengers to take possession of the gift.

I hope you took a brief pause when you heard those words today, "Let us kill the son and get his inheritance." and realize that is exactly what happened. It wasn't just the scribes and Pharisees who turned Jesus over to be crucified. It wasn't just his disciples that turned their backs on Jesus as he died on the cross. I'll give you a moment to look up hymn number 92 in the green hymnal. How does the first verse of this hymn strike you? Do you fully understand the impact of the words, **were you there when they crucified my Lord?**

Now that you have been convicted like the Pharisees by this parable, there is the more important message for you to hear. This message starts in the 4th verse of that same hymn. **Were you there when God raised him from the dead?** Jesus did not give up on the vineyard. The vineyard that was laid to waste in Isaiah is raised to new life in Jesus' new telling of this parable. But nothing has changed about who is in charge. Any effort for you to lay any claim on determining the destiny of your salvation is not in the hands of you, the tenant. Your salvation is fully and completely in the hands of the owner of the vineyard who sent his son knowing full well that he would be killed so that the tenants would get the inheritance. And guess what, this is the Lord's own doing. This was the plan of salvation described in the 3rd chapter of Genesis.

The old vineyard has been destroyed. The stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone and there are never two cornerstones. Jesus is the cornerstone and you and I are not. The old stone, the law will only lead to death. Whether you crash into a stone, or it crushes you, the result is the same.

Jesus has cleared away stones of the law and has become your cornerstone. This is a hard thing for the Pharisees to hear and to receive and it still is hard for many today. But even Nicodemus the Pharisee who came to Jesus at night eventually came to faith in Jesus the cornerstone. And Paul who claimed to be the chief of all Pharisees was chosen by Jesus to be a messenger of this same good news that is yours today. Amen