

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 4, 2020

Introduction

As we move deeper into Matthew’s Gospel, the parables of Jesus take on a sharper edge.

In the Gospel reading for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Jesus has just entered Jerusalem for the final time. When he enters the city, he is acclaimed as the Messiah as palm branches are strewn in his path. In the week before his crucifixion, Jesus addresses the crowds with parables that are critical of the chief priests and the Pharisees. *The Parable of the Vineyard and the Wicked Tenants* is a sharp critique of the existing religious establishment and its twisting of theology to suit its own needs.

This difficult parable is considered a parable of judgment by those who study the literary forms of the Gospels. One cannot fully appreciate the thrust of our Lord’s words unless one knows that the image of the vineyard has traditionally been understood to symbolize God’s people. The Scripture Lesson from Isaiah 5 provides the image that Jesus uses to make his point. Those who heard Jesus’ parable would immediately recognize the image of the vineyard from the prophet’s words. This a stinging rebuke of the popular piety of the religious leaders of the day.

As I indicate in the sermon, this is not one of my favorite parables. I think I understand what Jesus’ words meant to his original hearers. But a present-day application becomes much more difficult. My thinking has been shaped by an Episcopal priest who has written three books about our Lord’s parables. I consider Fr. Robert Capon’s thoughts extremely helpful. His books are: *Parables of Judgment, Parables of Grace, and Parables of the Kingdom*. I recommend them highly. Sometimes our Lord’s parables push us into unfamiliar territory and challenges some of our fundamental assumptions about God’s grace.

Pastoral Note

Our next scheduled worship services are on October 11 and 18. At Bethel, we will do as we did on September 27 with me presiding standing outside the sliding doors of fellowship hall. At Immanuel, we did our outside worship as before. Many have chosen to remain in their vehicles with windows/doors open. They report that they can hear everything.

I have been asked several times, ‘When can we return to normal and worship in the sanctuary?’ I cannot answer that question. Because I am in a higher risk group, I have reservations about spending any length of time in a closed building. On Monday morning [September 28], I listened to a presentation by Dr Michael Osterholm, a nationally known epidemiologist from the University of Minnesota. He talked about

aerosols and droplets as the way that Covid-19 is spread from one person to the next. He identified churches, bars, and similar closed spaces as being places where ‘super-spreader’ events often have their beginning. He also noted that the infection rates in Minnesota [both urban and rural] are increasing. This concerns me, not only for my health, but also for the health of our members in both churches who are also in high risk categories for various health reasons. We must be wise and trust the science.

Having said all of this, I am sending a ‘return to the sanctuary’ plan to both of our presidents for their information and possible use. This provides benchmarks that can help our councils decide when it is safe for pastor and people to begin in-house worship. At the very least, this plan can serve as a guideline for reopening our sanctuaries whenever that happens. There will be a time when we will return to worship in the sanctuary, but it will be a new normal. This new normal may well include wearing masks at all times, new singing of hymns and liturgies, and social distancing.

Worshiping as we have been ***will not*** ‘destroy the church’ as someone said to me recently. We are the church, no matter how or where we conduct worship. Being the church also means that we must be sensitive to all of members and their health concerns. So please continue to be safe. Wear masks when out in public and socially distance. Take care.

***In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve***

Scripture Lesson – Isaiah 5.1-7

[The prophet speaks], ‘Let 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!’

Gospel – Matthew 21.33-46

[Jesus said to the crowds,] ³³**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.

³⁶**Again 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?"

⁴¹**They 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'?"

⁴³**Therefore 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.

“Surprise Ending”

Let us pray. Almighty God, you are the Lord of history, the One who creates, sustains, and, through Jesus, redeems our fallen world from its sin. But Lord, we are often a stubborn folk, confident that we alone control our lives. Dearest Father, save us from our arrogance. Guide us each day with your Holy Spirit so that we might faithfully do the work you have given us to do in the Vineyard. Teach us to live with a sense of expectation as we wait for the harvest and for the coming of your Son to claim what is yours. We pray in the name of Jesus, who will come again. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the joys of reading is encountering the unexpected. Be we child or adult, stories are more fun to read if there are surprises; something we do not expect or something that scares us a little bit. That is the only way I can account for the success of R. L. Stine's *Goosebumps* stories for young readers and Stephen King's novels for adults. Both specialize in the unexpected. I think it's a safe way for us to explore the world in which we live . . . a world that sometimes **can be** very frightening . . . a world where the stories of our lives frequently have surprise endings.

When I was in high school English, I encountered one such story written by the French author Guy de Maupassant. It's entitled *The Necklace*. It took me a while to find the story again on the internet. *The Necklace* is the story of a pretentious young woman who was invited to attend a society party with her husband. But she fretted about accepting the invitation because she had no gown elegant enough to wear. Fearing that she would not make a suitable impression on their host or the other guests, she pleaded with her husband for money to buy a more beautiful dress. But even the dress was not enough; she also needed jewelry made from precious stones to impress all who might see her. Since they had only a modest income, she borrowed a diamond necklace from a wealthy friend.

The gathering was a success; her name was on the lips of all the other guests. The woman achieved the notoriety she sought. But when the party was over, she realized that she had lost the precious necklace. It was nowhere to be found. Ashamed and afraid to admit the loss, she and her husband went to a jewelry store to purchase another. To meet the price of forty thousand francs, they spent their life-savings and borrowed the balance at interest.

The years that followed were hard and difficult. They were forced to give up the pleasantries of life. The young couple moved to a cheaper apartment; they gave up their servant; she did laundry for other people; and he did copyist's work at night. But in ten years, the debt was paid. By coincidence that very day, she chanced to meet the wealthy friend whose necklace she had replaced. Bitter and broken, the once pretentious woman said, "*It's because of you that my life has been without joy. Ten years ago, I lost your diamond necklace and then replaced it so you would not think ill of me.*"

The woman looked at her sadly and said, "Diamond necklace? My poor dear . . . Mine was an imitation, barely worth 500 francs." It is a short story with a surprise ending; a story that reveals human beings at their worst and at their best. It is a short story much like Jesus' Parable of the Vineyard in today's Gospel – **Another story with a surprise ending.**

It was a turbulent time in the life of Jesus. His entry into Jerusalem brought cries of ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ to the lips of the crowds. Jesus was clearly a person of some importance, and the chief priests and Pharisees were worried. He was much more than just a country preacher. They recognized him for what he was: a dangerous man with Messianic pretensions. In the days that followed, Jesus drove the clergy’s money changers from the Temple; he preached a radical new interpretation of the Law; and he promised God’s Kingdom to the unclean and the despised of the world. As far as the chief priests and Pharisees were concerned, Jesus was a menace and something had to be done.

Perceiving their thoughts, Jesus told them the Parable of the Vineyard and the Wicked Tenants. Some seven hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah used the image of the vineyard to describe the coming destruction of Jerusalem. [See the accompanying Scripture Lesson.] So when Jesus told the **Parable of the Vineyard and the Wicked Tenants**, the chief priests and Pharisees knew exactly what he was talking about. Like Isaiah’s parable, it was a parable of judgment.

Jesus said,

‘LISTEN TO ANOTHER PARABLE. THERE WAS A LANDOWNER WHO PLANTED A VINEYARD, PUT A FENCE AROUND IT, DUG A WINEPRESS IN IT, AND BUILT A TOWER. THEN HE LEASED IT TO TENANTS AND WENT TO ANOTHER COUNTRY. WHEN THE HARVEST TIME HAD COME, HE SENT HIS SLAVES TO THE TENANTS TO COLLECT HIS PRODUCE. BUT THE TENANTS SEIZED HIS SLAVES AND BEAT ONE, KILLED ANOTHER, AND STONED ANOTHER. AGAIN HE SENT OTHER SLAVES, MORE THAN THE FIRST, AND THEY TREATED THEM THE SAME WAY. FINALLY HE SENT HIS SON, SAYING, ‘THEY WILL RESPECT IT MY SON.’

BUT WHEN THEY SAW THE SON, THEY SAID TO THEMSELVES, ‘THIS IS THE HEIR, LET US KILL HIM AND GET HIS INHERITANCE.’ SO THEY SEIZED HIM, THREW HIM OUT OF THE VINEYARD, AND KILLED HIM. NOW WHEN THE OWNER OF THE VINEYARD COMES, WHAT WILL HE DO TO THOSE TENANTS?’

The chief priests and Pharisees said, ‘He will put the wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time. Then Matthew adds, ‘When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds because they regarded him as a prophet.’

It is time for me to make a confession: In more thirty-eight years of preaching, I have intentionally avoided this text. It comes up every three years. Several times, I've been on vacation. But there have been times when I've purposely avoided the **Parable of the Vineyard and the Wicked Tenants**. So this week, I am going to face the parable head on and see where it takes us. Please understand that it is always difficult to talk about judgment. And it's even more difficult to talk about judgment when you are the one being judged.

This is a parable of judgment told by Jesus against the religious leaders of the day. The vineyard is the traditional image for God's people, and the tenants are those who are charged with their care – kings, prophets, and priests. At harvest time, these unfaithful tenants refuse to give the owner his share of the bounty. Not only do they kill the messengers sent by the absentee owner, but they also kill his son, hoping to steal his inheritance. It is not a pretty picture. Religious leaders and clergy do not come off well at all. So you can understand my discomfort.

But now, after being led to this difficult parable again, I would like to suggest a different perspective. At first reading, this parable tempts us to point the finger of judgment at others, in this case, religious leaders, and assume that we are beyond God's judgment. But that's not what this parable is all about. In the Apostle Paul's understanding of the church, affirmed later by Martin Luther, we are a *priesthood of all believers* charged with responsibility for the ministry of God. And as part of this priesthood, we all – both you and me – have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. So this parable is a parable of judgment for lay and clergy alike; no exceptions. We are all in this together.

The point of the parable is God's judgment. A judgment that comes when we fail to respond to the Lord's grace as we go about our lives. But you ask, "How are we judged? What more does God expect from us?"

- Is it possible that we have not been good stewards of what God has given us?
- Have we and our church been faithful in '*feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned?*'
- Have we been reconciled with that brother or sister in Christ with whom we no longer talk?
- Have we forgiven our enemies; even those who have hurt us?
- Have we allowed God to be Lord over every aspect of our lives be it work or recreation, athletics or study, wealth or family? Does God take precedence over everything else in our lives?

You see? There's enough judgment here for all of us because we do not take God, or even the Son who has been sent to collect the harvest seriously. We continue to live the way we want to. In fact, you might even say that in our brokenness, we kill the Son again and again.

Now for the surprise ending. And Jesus said to them, **'NOW WHEN THE OWNER OF THE VINEYARD COMES, WHAT WILL HE DO TO THOSE TENANTS?'** *The chief priests and Pharisees said, 'He will put the wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time.'*

Some surprise ending! Parable or not, even we could see that one coming. What other answer could there possibly be, but to put such criminals to death? They deserve nothing else. Justice calls for the wicked tenants' death. That is the way we would deal with sin; that is the way we expect God to deal with sin; *and that is exactly the problem.* We are cognizant of everyone else's sin, but not our own. Deep down, we want law, not God's grace. We want something we can understand; something that lets us depend on ourselves.

I think that this parable catches us red-handed in our most common game . . . playing God. From the very beginning in Genesis to this very day, we have resented the fact that this world and our lives belong to Another. And we do our best to either forget it or deny it, living as if we are gods unto ourselves. *'Put the wretches to a miserable death' we all say. . . 'Giver them what they deserve.'* And, if the truth be told, both we and they deserve it because we are the wicked tenants.

But the surprise ending is that God does not do any such thing at all. The surprise ending is that God does not judge goodness or badness; but rather, God judges the world and us on our faith in Jesus alone. **That's the surprise ending.** It is a surprise because it is just not the way we do things. We are into the merit and achievement game. We want to pay our own way. Like the pretentious young women in *The Necklace*, we sacrifice our very lives trying to pay off our debt.

In his little book, *The Parables of Judgment*, Fr. Robert Capon makes this observation about the Parable of the Vineyard and the Wicked Tenants. He writes, *'The self-justifying world, including an alarmingly large number of Christians, . . . think that being well-behaved is more important to God than just trusting his forgiveness.'* Jesus is a threat to us because he does not do it our way. He is a threat because he demands that we put God before everything else in our lives. Sinners that we are, we say to Jesus, *'Master, put the wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants . . .'* Ironically, we speak our own death sentence.

But here is the real surprise ending: 'God's ways are not our ways, nor are his thoughts our thoughts. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is our Father's love for us.' The surprise ending is that on Easter morning, our loving Father set aside the judgment of human sin and raised Jesus to new life. The good news of Easter is that the Son was killed by unfaithful tenants, but now he lives to bring life to those who killed him.

And today, this same Jesus invites us to his Table to celebrate not only his death for us; but also, his resurrection for us. There is nothing else for us to do, but live in the forgiving grace of God. And truly, that is a surprise ending. Amen.