



Scripture & Sermon

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October 4, 2020

Matthew 21:33-46

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. **34** When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. **35** But 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. **37** Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' **38** But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' **39** So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. **40** Now 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."

42 Jesus 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. **44** The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. **46** They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Gracious and Fruitful God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

Today's Scripture immediately follows last week's and is a continuation of Jesus's response to the Pharisee's question: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

A brief recap of where we find ourselves in Jesus's story: This interaction is happening on Holy Monday of Holy Week. We all know now how that week would come to a close, with Jesus's death, and Jesus knew then too. So, these few days in Jerusalem we get to see Jesus holding nothing back and laying it all out there for the Jewish leaders who he knew would be a major part of his demise just days later. That first Holy Week started just the day before as Jesus paraded into town, making quite the statement of what he thought about the culture of Jerusalem. He rode straight to the temple and made a scene, condemning the practices of money changing and selling products by flipping tables and criticizing the Jewish leaders as corrupt. Once he cleared them out, he welcomed into the temple those who the Jewish leaders would not allow in because they were deemed unclean, the blind and lame, who Jesus healed and taught. All these things really peeved the Jewish leaders who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah or a true prophet. Jesus argues with the Chief Priests and Elders and spends the night outside of town. As he heads back into town the next morning, Jesus curses a fig tree for not having fruit. Many people interpret this interlude to be a parable in action, Jesus stopping to do this to make a point about how the Temple in Jerusalem was not bearing fruit and being deserving of condemnation. That brought us to last week's passage that gives us the context of the ongoing conversation we read today. As Jesus is teaching in the temple, the anger of the chief priests and elders boils over and they confront Jesus, trying to trap him into losing their battle of wits. They question how he has gained the authority he uses, trying to delegitimize him. But Jesus won't be trapped, and turns the tables on them making them recognize that if they believe that John is a prophet, then they ought to believe what he teaches about who Jesus is. Jesus emphasizes and builds on his point and continues to win the battle of wits by telling 3 parables, the first of which we discussed last week. That parable told of a father with two sons, each of which were asked to go work in the field. One said no, but then changed his mind and did it, one said yes, but then didn't go do it at all. As Jesus prompted the Jewish leaders to tell him which had done his Father's will, a question which had an obvious answer, he made it so they had to admit to the answer that would condemn the way they were leading God's people in Jerusalem. The parable spoke

against the ways that they had started doing what they wanted and thought was best, instead of paying attention to God at work, inviting them to change. The first parable thus reminded us to remember God has ultimate authority and not us or other Earthly powers. Reading it today, Jesus challenges us to live out our faith in God by following God's authority and working toward bringing about God's Will amongst us.

This is the message that brings us into the next parable, which we can assume will continue Jesus's train of thought. This time the story is about a landowner who created a vineyard. He did so in the usual way, putting in a fence, digging a wine press, and building a watchtower. Also typical, he then leased the land to tenants to be the ones to work the field. This lease would have been some kind of agreement that they would work the land in return for a percentage of the crop, typically a pretty small percentage. The rest goes to the landowner who would send people to collect what he was due on a regular basis. It is in this system that the tenants are frustrated and driven to violence, killing those that come to collect. Then the son is sent and they believe that if they kill him they will receive his inheritance. Alas, his father was still ultimately in charge of the vineyard and so those tenants will be replaced with others that will produce fruit for the landowner. It is important to remember that it is the Jewish leaders who give the violent response, saying they should be put to death. Jesus doesn't say that part.

Compared to how it appears in other Gospels, the way that Matthew writes this parable makes it clear that he expected it to be read as an allegory. It is not a parable with a simple moral lesson, but a tale to parallel something happening for real. It is pretty easy to put together who the characters are supposed to represent, especially with Jesus's interpretation included after the parable. The landowner who planted the vineyard is God, the Tenant farmers are the Jewish leaders (particularly the Chief Priests and Elders that Jesus was conversing with), the servants sent to the tenant farmers represent the Prophets (the two groups of them to parallel the former and latter prophet groupings of the Old Testament), the son obviously represents Jesus, the Vineyard represents the people of God as a whole, and the fruit represents the good works of the faithful.

It is important to lay out which characters parallel the real-life counterparts as it reminds us that the wicked tenants of the story are a parallel of the Jewish leaders, not Jewish people as a whole. This text, among many others, has been used as a weapon against Jewish people, defending Anti-Semitism. Those who interpret it that way think of the wicked tenants as Jewish people as a whole and take Jesus's interpretation of the results of the parable, that "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom" means the Jewish people can no longer be considered the people of God. This mindset has led to persecution and oppression of Jewish people through history. It has also led to feelings of superiority in Christians who read this story and think they are just being praised and have nothing to

learn. So, it is important that we think of the wicked tenants as the specific Jewish Leaders who Jesus was bantering with and trying to get them to recognize their own corruptness. This is a parable speaking against corrupt leaders, not an entire people group.

It is also important to remember with texts like these that Jesus was Jewish. He was raised Jewish and would have been considered Jewish by the people. Like many reformers that came after him, including Martin Luther and John Wesley, Jesus's goal was to reform the faith and not create a separatist movement trying to supercede. Jesus was speaking to Jewish leaders as a fellow Jewish man, which gave him some more space to give constructive criticism. It's basically that classic line from siblings in movies and tv, "I'm allowed to make fun of them, but no one else is!"

So with all that in mind, let's bring it together. This parable told in this context is another condemnation of the Jewish leaders that have led the temple into corruption and fruitless faith. God had tried to steer them straight through the messages brought by prophets, but each of those prophets had been rejected and many killed by those they were sent to guide. Over time, those Jewish leaders gained more and more power and influence. So, God sent a greater authority, God's Son, to try to get through to them and make a change. This is where the parable moves to prophecy, as Jesus knows his death is coming soon. Those who rejected the prophets also reject the son, taking the role of authority that he occupied for themselves. Those leaders were no longer following God's authority, but their own and so they were no longer producing fruit for God and God's Kingdom, but for their own. Producing fruit means good works and faith, that are according to God's will for justice and righteousness and lead to more of God's justice and righteousness in the world. The text gives us a bit of interpretation of the parable, as Jesus says in verse 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." God does not give up on the vineyard of God's people, but instead raises up new caretakers, new leaders who will lead as God calls them and bring flourishing fruit to God.

Though this parable was originally a condemnation of those corrupt leaders, it still has some things to teach us today. If we look past the condemnation of those direct leaders, it is a reminder to us to be careful of when power is taken advantage of and someone says they are doing God's work when they are really doing work that has the outcomes they want. This tells us that God creates God's Kingdom through the fruits produced by those who are truly working with God. There are ways that we can apply this lesson in the Christian Church and in our local church and in our lives. In the church universal, we can find pieces of human interest that have weaved their way into the way we do things or even what we believe. One of the major ways that we can see the influence of wicked tenants on the vineyard of God's people is in the ways that White Supremacy has been weaved into our American Christianity. These last few years, the

white supremacy that has lived on in our country has had a resurgence and has become much more public and visible. Confederate flags are being defended, swastikas have been graffitied and used in protest signs, “White power” has been chanted in the streets, and this week, in the presidential debate, our current president was asked point blank to condemn white supremacy, and he sputtered before saying the “Proud Boys,” a far-right group with a history of violence, should “Stand down and stand by.” No matter what he meant or what he thought he was saying, or what he said later, it is clear that White Supremacy is a big problem in our country when the president is asked to condemn white supremacy and the answer is not an easy and straightforward answer that he doesn’t struggle to come to. This week and the past few years events of white supremacist fervor is but symptoms of the greater infrastructure of white supremacy at play in our culture. Unfortunately, white supremacy was also weaved into the foundations of American religion. So much of faith in America grew with the beginning of our country, and as faith and life are so intertwined, many of the values of white supremacy weaved their way into American Christian Theology, to the point now that ideas that can be traced back to white supremacist origins are seen as the Gospel truth by many. Of course, white supremacy in our faith is easy to see in those that are being blatantly racist, but it also exists in subtle ways. It can be seen in the way we talk about evangelizing, or that most depictions of Jesus and other Bible characters give them white skin and often blue eyes and light hair. While looking for advent materials recently, I saw a nativity sticker set for kids that had Mary as a pale red head. The only reason I knew it was Mary was because she was the only female in the sticker set. White supremacy plays into how we think about outreach and treatment of the oppressed. There is work to be done as American Christians, as a part of the church universal, to root out and dismantle those threads of white supremacy that continue to benefit the privileged while leaving others to suffer, even though we were not the ones to plant them there. This parable, this teaching from Jesus, reminds us of the importance of that work as those threads of white supremacy are not producing fruit for God, but instead perpetuate injustice and suffering.

When we think of what this parable has to say to our church, it can act as a reminder to be listening and discerning what is God’s Will for our church. As the church, we are leaders in our community and leaders in what it means to live out Christian faith. This parable condemned the Jewish leaders for becoming self-aggrandizing and not producing fruit, but also for not recognizing God’s voice speaking to them repeatedly through the prophets and then through Jesus to change their ways. God does not see us doing something not according to God’s Will and just leave us to it, God reaches out and gives us chances to recognize that it is time to do something different. Let us hear this reminder from this parable and the one from last week to look toward God’s Will, toward God’s values, for how we should proceed instead of relying on our own judgment. Thankfully, we can trust that our consequences for straying from the path are

not doled out by the Jewish leaders who propose putting the wicked tenants to death. Instead, we are told that God will raise up new leaders to bring about God's Kingdom.

That brings us to what this parable has to teach us for our individual walks of faith. Part of what we can each do to help the fruit flourish is to ask God, listen, and discern how God is calling you to care for or tend the Kingdom of God. This passage is between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, but we can all be a part of tending to the Kingdom of God and helping it flourish and be shared beyond ourselves. Remembering to check in by asking ourselves how we are personally helping the Kingdom to flourish is important as we can become content doing the same routine with our faith and church life and we may miss that that routine is no longer bearing fruit. Or maybe we have become disconnected from what we had been doing which was fruitful and we have to find new ways. What will bear good fruit for God's Kingdom can have seasons just as a vineyard surely is tended differently depending on the season. Right now, we are in a particularly peculiar season that requires ministry looking a lot different than we are used to, but that doesn't mean our call to embody the church and tend to God's Kingdom has been put on pause. We can all use this reminder from the parable to check in with ourselves and with God for how we can live into helping God's Kingdom to flourish.

So let us all hear the reminder from Jesus that reaches out from this text and learn from the mistakes of those who came before us. Let us do our best to work in tune with what is truly God's Will for us and the church and the world and be a part of bringing flourishing to all God's people. We can trust from these words from Jesus that God will be at work in the world, either through us or through others to bring about God's Will, so I hope we can be a part of it.

Will you pray with me?

Just and Loving God,

Your faithfulness to your people has been steadfast and ever forgiving. We learn from your Scriptures that your people have had a long history of seeking you and not always listening to you. We thank you for sending your Son to set some of the record straight and leave us with teachings and guidance that we can still learn from today, even though you knew that he would also be rejected and killed. Lord, help us to better listen to your guidance in our own lives, for ourselves and for the flourishing of your church and your people. Help us to recognize your fruit and how it stands out against the fruits we make of our own ideas. Your Will, your guidance, your plans for us are what are best for us and for all. You do not promise that the work in the fields to create Flourishing will be easy, but you do promise that the harvest will be worth it. Thank you for not giving up on us and being willing to guide us anew each time we don't get it right. We pray these things in the name of your Son and Spirit, Amen.