

Sermon on The Parable of the Wicked Tenants
October 4th, 2020
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Grace and peace to you on this day as we join together for worship.

We are back. We are back in the Gospel of Matthew, back in the Temple in Jerusalem where Jesus is teaching, and even back in a vineyard in this parable. So just to catch us up where we are at in this Scripture for today, this text takes place on the Monday of Holy Week, meaning that it's the last Monday before Jesus is crucified on the cross. Jesus is in the Temple in Jerusalem- he has just arrived the day before to a crowd shouting "Hosanna" and then cleansed the Temple of those using the space as a market place. The chief priests were not very happy with any of this, so they confronted Jesus, asking Jesus by who's authority is he doing these things. Instead of Jesus answering outright, he turns the question back on them and gives them a parable to make an example out of them.

The parable we find ourselves in today comes right after the parable from last week. It's almost like Jesus didn't have time to take a breath before he dives right in to his next teaching. And compared to other parables and stories we have heard from Jesus, this one seems to take a more serious turn. Jesus shares the story about a landowner who plants a vineyard and hires tenants, or farmhands, to oversee and care for the vineyard. When the harvest is ready the landowner sends his servants to collect the fruit, presumably grapes. But the farmhands beat and kill those that the landowner sends. He sends a second round of servants, but the same thing happens to them. And finally, the landowner sends his son, because surely they will listen to him. Surely the son will have more authority and receive more respect as he is the landowner's son.

But he didn't. The farmhands actually targeted him more because he was the landowner's son, believing that if they kill him, they will receive his inheritance. They will be able to keep the vineyard all to themselves, running it and producing fruit the way they want to. Sure, the landowner is still in the picture, but what's he going to do about it? He's far off at a distance someplace. He hasn't come yet to check on them, he's only sent his servants and son to do so.

Jesus is amazing for so many reasons, and what is incredible about his parables is his ability to put so much and teach so much into one single story. This parable can be interpreted as Jesus giving specific roles to the different people and places he describes. The landowner is God, the one who is ultimately in charge of all. The vineyard is Israel, holding God's chosen people. The tenants who supposedly care for the vineyard are the Jewish religious leaders. The servants who come to collect the harvest are the prophets, the ones who are prophesying Jesus' coming. And the son who is sent by the landowner, by God in this interpretation, who surely will not be harmed, is Jesus.

Jesus is showing and teaching the chief priests and elders gathered in the temple that day their fate, what they have done and what will continue to happen to them. In the same breath, Jesus is also giving a taste of his death to come. That no matter how many prophets may come to collect the harvest or to tell of Jesus' coming, the death of Jesus will happen at the hands of the religious leaders. Jesus is a bold person, but he seems to become more outspoken in his final week, knowing all that is still to come and that his time is limited to teach and share all he has in hopes that something, anything may stick with those listening. And in his last week he boldly calls out the people who are not tending to the Kingdom of Heaven the way he has been teaching them to.

I am struck in this parable by the setting taking place in a vineyard yet again. Although the vineyard can represent Israel in this context, it could be seen as all of creation, and we are the workers who tend and care to this vineyard. We are the ones who help create the fruits to harvest, they are the fruits of the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus is so adamant about us knowing about and inviting us to participate in.

This vineyard reminds me of Wartburg Seminary where I go to school. At Wartburg we have a daily chapel every morning, and last year I was on the chapel staff. I was a sacristan, which meant I worked with student groups on planning the services for their week, answering questions, and handling the details of the

chapel space itself. Every week, pre-covid, we had a Holy Communion service, and it was part of my role to make sure we had enough wine stocked and ready for the service.

The unique thing about Wartburg is that we make our own communion wine. On campus we have grape vines in our parking lot, and one weekend in September those living on campus are invited to come pick the grapes and help sort and press them to make wine and grape juice. It then gets stored until it's ready to be shared around the communion table in chapel. People of all ages and all abilities come to do the work of harvesting this fruit, being part of the process in making it into the means of grace that is given to us by Jesus. It becomes not only the wine we share around the table in worship, but the blood of Christ that is freely given to us. The vineyard in Wartburg's parking lot isn't a grand production, but it's a place where people come to work in community with one another, to harvest good fruits that then show the abundant grace of God.

In our Following Jesus Together discussion this week we talked about where we have been called in this vineyard. Where are we tending to the places and spaces in our own lives and helping further the Kingdom of Heaven, sharing God's grace and love with one another? With this question we noticed that it was surprisingly difficult to answer. In this time of social distancing the ways we have engaged with the world have changed. We haven't been able to go out and serve and work in the ways we used to. Instead in our discussion we needed to broaden and alter our definition of what it means to be the hands and feet of Jesus, working in the vineyard and proclaiming the love of God. Thoughts came up as simple as making phone calls to people, spending time with the family you are quarantined with, unexpectedly sharing what you have with a person in need on the corner of the street, educating yourself on social justice issues such as anti-racism work. The work in the vineyard isn't flashy work. It doesn't always get a picture published in the newspaper or a post on social media. But the work we are called to do in the vineyard is daily. We don't get to wipe our hands clean from the one time we stepped in. It's a constant tending and sharing the love of God with one another to produce good fruits to be harvested. And we get to do this because we are loved first by God.

When I look at the world today, it seems as though the harvest is not very plentiful. The good fruits that Jesus talks about coming from people are lacking. It seems the world has forgotten of is struggling how to extend love to one another. In this political season we are seeing arguments, bullying, the inability to have a cordial conversation with one another, whether it's in a presidential debate or in a casual conversation. We hear evil words and see oppressive actions against our marginalized siblings in Christ who are suffering. In this time of a global pandemic we are tired and anxious, wishing all of this could just be over. And sometimes, we act like it isn't still going on, just to have something feel normal again. We ourselves are not fruitful because we are living with a virus in our midst. This pandemic has taken so much from us and out of us, and there is a fear that we will lose even more if we continue in this way.

The vineyard, however, is still there. The world is ready and waiting for the daily proclamations of hope and good news done little by little. And the best news is that God continues to show up as well. God is the son, who has been sent to this vineyard who has died for our sake and brought creation back to God. God is the Spirit, that moves and guides us out of our fear and hate and back into faith and love. When the world seems to be going through a scarcity and the harvest is low, the promise that Christ is with us, laboring alongside us, being both encouragement and rest for us. We have already inherited the Kingdom of Heaven and are called children of God through Christ's death and resurrection. That is the good news and the grace that comes from this vineyard of life we live in and from the God that continues to create and renew it. And we get to show up, extending that same good news and grace to one another, even and especially when it is the most difficult to do so. Because we know and we trust that God is with us, both when the harvest is scarce and when the harvest is plentiful. Amen.