

October 8, 2017

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Vineyard and Tenants”

Matthew 21:33-46

As usual, I’m preaching on the Gospel lesson. But this reading is a very difficult one to preach because it is not really directed at you, the people of God. In its context Jesus has the Pharisees and Sadducees and leaders of the Jews squarely in His crosshairs. He is condemning Israel’s past leaders for rejecting God’s prophets and the leaders of first-century Israel for rejecting and killing God own Son.

Of course, this is for our good. *“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”* The crucified and risen Christ is the cornerstone of our faith on which the forgiveness of sin is assured. The Jews to whom Jesus was sent rejected Him to their condemnation, but we have received Him to our salvation!

But if this parable is all about the leaders of God’s people, where does that leave you, God’s people here?

Well there is great comfort to be had here, because God’s people are the vineyard; the vineyard for which the Master cares very deeply. In both the song from our reading in Isaiah today and in the Gospel lesson in Matthew it is quite clear that the Master, God, is very concerned with the vineyard, His people, and the fruit they bear.

This is a reminder that God is not a God far off. He cares about you. He is actively involved in His creation. While there is quite a bit of scary condemnation going on in these readings, the Gospel is clear in Jesus’ words, *“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.”* You are this people. You are here in faith producing the fruit of faith. You have received the gift St. Paul describes as *“not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”* This righteousness, this right-standing before God, is what those Jews rejected in rejecting Christ. But their rejection was Christ’s path to the cross where He took your sin and gave you His righteousness.

So you can remember that you are this day God’s beloved vineyard; His planting heading toward His harvest. No matter what hardship you may be facing in the world today, you can look forward in faith to the same glorious resurrection of which Jesus Christ is the firstfruits. That is definitely Gospel good news to inspire you to press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

But while you’re in the midst of that blessing, this parable should also spur you on to another action, that of praying for your pastor and for all pastors and the church at large.

You see, if you’re going to bring this parable forward into the 21st century, it is still quite relevant for the leaders of the church. The simple fact is the reality of Christ’s death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins hasn’t stopped spiritual leaders from rejecting the Son of God in the ways that He comes to save His people, His vineyard. The cross is still scandalous. It is an unmistakable reminder of how fallen we are as a people the God’s own Son had to humble Himself to such a torturous death to save us. This all availing sacrifice is so great that it demands all the glory be to God and leaves none to be had for us. It’s a truth that is very tough to preach, because sinful people just don’t want to hear it and sinful leaders are often willing to alter it.

Read your epistles in the New Testament. John and Paul and Peter are forced to write against false teaching because within a decade or two of Christ's ascension to heaven some "Christian" leaders are already leaving the truth of Christ's merit alone gaining us righteousness and giving glory to themselves and their own works and human wisdom.

We're celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation this year, a reminder that the church and its leaders had hidden the free Gospel behind a veil of human works, the suppression of God's Word and plain old politics and corruption. Today we have churches preaching sins as virtues, God as the big ATM machine in the sky, Jesus Christ as some type of divine Prozac for your earthly life and any number of other proclamations that are everything except God nailed to the cross with your sins for salvation beyond this mortal existence.

Pastor need your prayers that they would have the boldness to preach rightly, especially when the world leads and pressures them to preach, teach and confess something other than the cross. Churches need your prayers that people would have a passion for the truth of the Gospel and settle for nothing less from their pastors. All of us need prayers that we do not lose our zeal for the truth of Christ, but hold it as our highest good never to be surrendered under pressure from inside or outside the church.

It's funny, while writing this sermon I couldn't help but think of Joel Osteen. Most of you know that Joel Osteen is one of my favorite targets when it comes to pointing out bad theology and garbage preaching. Sin, repentance and forgiveness in Christ is not something you find in his sermons. Frankly, he's awful.

But you know what? I've mocked and ridiculed Joel Osteen. I've become angry at Joel Osteen just about every time I've listened to him. But I've never prayed for Joel Osteen. Shame on me. I should. Can you image how many people would hear the Gospel if Joel Osteen started preaching it? He'd probably lose his popularity real quick, but how many might come to know the true riches of Christ before his ministry went bankrupt? It's a prayer worth praying, both for Joel and for the kingdom.

So kind of an odd sermon this week. In the end this message exhorts you, the blessed vineyard of God's planting, to pray for the wicked tenants. Once the tenants rejected the Holy Son of God and crucified Him in a horrible sin by which they condemned themselves yet accomplished the will of God that mankind be redeemed by the holy and precious blood of Jesus. Gifted with Spirit-planted faith in this divine work, nourished by the washing of Baptismal waters and His Word of promise, you grow this day toward the resurrection from the dead, eternal life your present possession.

Yet the tenants, the leaders of Christ's church, are still but sinful people prone toward wandering into human wisdom, revering earthbound culture, and wallowing in arrogant pride. Pray their eyes remain open to see Christ crucified for these and all sins, that their desire would always be to serve this Christ crucified and proclaim nothing but His holy will, which is the harvest of His blessed vineyard, the church.

Pray that we all bear the fruit of faith, which is always and only in Jesus.

Amen.