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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22A)

October 5, 2014

Text: Matthew 21:33–46

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

After Jesus tore through the Temple, early in Holy Week, clearing out the money changers and hawkers of religion, our Lord took up residence in His Father's house and taught His people about His Father's kingdom. The chief priests and elders of Israel still don't think Jesus has the authority to do such audacious things. Today's gospel reading from 21:33–46 continues that contentious debate between Jesus and the Israel's leaders.

Jesus, the master preacher and teacher, borrows richly and deeply from the OT in order to demonstrate the depth and severity of unbelief found in Israel's leaders. His chosen text is Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard, today's OT reading from Isaiah 5. There are a great deal of similarities between Isaiah 5 and Matthew 21. They both speak of a vineyard, a beloved vineyard in fact. The vineyard owner in both accounts did everything needed to ensure the success of the vineyard. The stones were removed from the fields, a protecting wall was erected, and the best vines were planted. In Jesus' version of the story, the vineyard is leased out to tenants (vs. 33) while the vineyard owner leaves for another country.

The tenants' job was really quite simple. Take care of the vines and the grapes they will produce. It requires skill, a good deal of sweat equity, and patience. Otherwise, live on the land. Enjoy the generosity of the vineyard owner and produce the fruits of the vineyard.

In both stories, one expects a happy ending. Everything is in order. Every detail is accounted for and the harvest is at hand. That's when the trouble begins. Listen to how Isaiah describes the results of such care, love, and attention. Vs. 2, "he (vineyard owner) looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes."

In Isaiah's telling of the story, Israel is represented by the vineyard. God is the vineyard owner who plants and loves the vineyard. Listen to God's agonizing complaint against Israel, "What was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done

in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?” (vs. 4). Can you feel the agonized astonishment? What more could God have done for His people? He gave them a promised land flowing with milk and honey. They had the covenants and holy promises; prophets, priests, and kings were sent to serve them with the truth of God’s saving Word. They had the assurance of a glorious present and the hope for an even more glorious future with the coming of the Messiah. Instead, they rejected God’s Word, killed His prophets, and so often worshipped false gods of every sort.

Our Lord’s version contains a similar tale of disappointment. God the Father is represented by the vineyard owner. The tenants represent Israel. Servants are sent to gather the fruits of the vineyard. The servants are represented by priests and prophets. What did Israel do to God’s servants? They beat some, stoned to death others (vs. 34–36). It was a gruesome mess. Just read the OT historical books; read through the prophets. God demonstrates His faithfulness and love time and time again. In the end, Israel rejects God’s love for the enticements of other less-than savory suitors. The chief priest and elders of Israel, the ones to whom Jesus is speaking, are following the same destructive path.

But Jesus isn’t content to simply retrace Israel’s sad history of unbelief and disobedience. No, He adds a new stanza to the Song of the Vineyard. It begins in vs. 37, “Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’” Do you hear the pathos in those words? Finally. They will respect my son. Vs. 38, “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’” And that’s what they do according to vs. 39, they kill the son.

Remember who Jesus is telling this story to, the chief priest and elders of Israel. They represent the tenants who plot the death of the son. They are the responsible party. But here’s the glorious irony of Jesus’ version of Isaiah’s Song of the Vineyard. The Son indeed dies, the Son of God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. When Jesus tells this story, His death and resurrection are only a few short days away. Because the Son dies, His inheritance, the glories of heave, is made available to the world. It’s made available to you. God’s eternal kingdom is made available to all people because Jesus obeys the will of His Father to go to Jerusalem and be killed by the hands of the unbelieving tenants.

And that’s why this parable must be heard in the 21st century Church. It’s not simply about Israel’s historic rejection of Jesus and His authority to redeem the world. It’s

about the love that God the Father has for you and me and for all people. He gives His most beloved and precious Son for us.

In order to establish His teaching, Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22–23, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (vs. 42). Jesus is the rejected cornerstone, rejected by the leaders of Israel. He is not deemed fit to be included in the house of Israel. So God the Father takes this stone of offense and builds His indestructible Church. Jesus told His disciples earlier that not even the gates of hell would prevail against His beloved Church (Matthew 16:18).

Dear saints of God, this marvelous, indestructible Church is your inheritance. The Gospel and the Sacraments are the choicest treasures. In Christ, you are filled with the Holy Spirit and made a special people called together to shine the light and love of Christ to all nations. What a glorious privilege is afforded to each us.

But there is also a solemn warning spoken by our Lord Jesus in vs. 43–44, “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” The kingdom of God established in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ will be manifested in a people who produce the fruits of that kingdom. In other words, the Church will be established where Christ’s Word is taught in its truth and purity and where it is heard and believed in true faith.

We must never fall into the error of thinking that we are entitled to be living members of Christ’s kingdom because of our family history or lineage or even because we are listed on a congregation’s membership roster. That was Israel’s mistake.

In today’s epistle reading from Philippians 3, Paul lists his most superior pedigree for being considered a faithful Jew: circumcised, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, zealous for the Law, etc. If anyone could boast it was Paul. But then he concludes, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (vs. 8). To know Jesus, the rejected and resurrected Son of God the Father, is all that is needed or required.

When we fall upon Jesus in repentance and faith, our own works of self-righteousness are shattered. In their place, we find a righteousness “which comes through faith in

Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (vs. 9). In Jesus, Paul found the rejected and killed Son of today’s parable about the vineyard. In that Jesus, Paul found justification; that is, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. And that Jesus fired the apostle’s soul. “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (vs. 12–14).

How can the sins and failures of the past, present, and future, be forgotten? In the justifying love and grace of Jesus, the rejected, crucified, and resurrected Son of the Father. We have Christ’s promise that He will care for you, His beautiful vineyard, His Church. The solemn warning is that we are to live in His grace and receive it in faith and trust. If not, it will be given to another.

His vineyard is open to all people. This local expression of Christ’s vineyard, this congregation and the Gospel message proclaimed here in Word and Sacraments, is for any and everyone, to be received according to Christ’s plan and purposes. Jesus has provided for every conceivable need. You, dear people of God, are the vineyard of the Lord Jesus Christ, elect and precious in His eyes. May you grow and prosper until the Day you see your beloved Savior face to face in His splendor and glory.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.