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Luke 20:9-20
Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 7, 2019

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

Our text, the gospel reading and Jesus parable of the vineyard the wicked tenants.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our text for this morning (Jesus telling the parable) actually occurs *during* Holy Week. Jesus has processed into Jerusalem and is now teaching in the temple and – as you know the events of Holy Week – is being challenged by the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. In the verses leading up to our text, they challenge whether he really has authority to do the miraculous things and teach the heavenly things he does; he silences their accusations by painting them into the proverbial corner – “was John the Baptist’s authority from man or from God?” – and because they know that either answer will mean rhetorical defeat for them, they don’t answer... and so Jesus turns his attention to the people gathered around and tells this *very* thinly veiled parable.

It’s so thinly veiled, we may be exercising some redundancy in explaining it: “A man planted a vineyard” – immediately, we should think of God planting his Church (recall, a few weeks ago, the tree planted in the vineyard, how that was an image of God planting

that soul into his *Church*?) – “A man planted his vineyard and let it out to tenants.”

To be a tenant is to be responsible for the well-being of the property. In the vineyard of God, that means the chief priests, scribes, and elders were responsible for God’s people. Had he not given authority to Aaron, the Levites, the whole priestly line, and did they not have accountability to God to ensure that Israel remained faithful? To be a tenant is no small thing in this parable!

Jesus continues: Soon the man sends a servant on his behalf, looking for fruit of the vineyard – how often are the faithful lives of the Church referred to as those that produce the fruits of the Spirit? Jesus even tells his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you, and I appointed you that you may go and bear fruit.” Elsewhere, John the Baptist calls out, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance!” This is the fruit – repentance and faithful living – God desires to find when he sends His servants to His Church.

But the tenants have now fallen into pride and unbelief. And so, there is no fruit of faith to be found. Instead, they treat the servant wickedly and send him away empty-handed. Did we not hear, just a few weeks ago, Jesus lament over Jerusalem as the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it? Now, again, the same thing, every prophet God sent the leaders of Israel, they rejected and sent away.

So, if the prophets won't be heeded, perhaps the Son will. Yes, the beloved Son (we know that phrase very well, from Jesus' baptism and his transfiguration)... the beloved Son is sent to these tenants, and *they recognize him for who he is*: "This is the heir; let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours."

Notice what Jesus is saying in this parable: he searches the heart of all men, and he *knows* that the chief priests, scribes, and elders recognize him to be the Christ of God. Yes, in their heart of hearts, they all know that the evidence is conclusive: this Jesus is the Chosen One. There's no denying it.

But they love their positions of power; they love their prominence in their society; they love their self-righteousness; they love themselves. So, "wouldn't it be better," they think to themselves, "if we destroy this Jesus and retain our place as the religious heads of Israel?"

And so, Jesus concludes his parable by admitting that the Son will be killed... and what will the owner of the vineyard do? Relent and hand the vineyard over to the tenants? No... he will *destroy* them and give the vineyard to others.

Now, as you and I sit here listening to this, we know the tenants are the 'bad guys'... we know that the servants have been terribly victimized, the Son is dead, the Father has a right to be angry... and yet, at the news of the tenants being punished, the chief priests, scribes, and elders all cry out in defense of the tenants! –

“Surely not!” (More woodenly from the Greek, “May it never be so!”)

Now they have exposed the secret hardness of their heart, and Jesus drives the point home with the words of the psalm, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” And then, he doubly highlights it, if you will, by adding, “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” St. Paul echoes the same when he calls Christ crucified, “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but for those who are being saved, the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Now, we can cheer Jesus on and say, “Wow! He really put those religious leaders in their place!”, and we can discuss how this parable was perhaps ‘the last straw’ so that they then (the text says) looked for any way in which to trip him up in something so as to deliver him to death. But, if that is our meditation, simply cheering Jesus on against ‘those wicked leaders,’ do we not miss the application for ourselves?

How often and how easily do we live as if we are in charge of the vineyard, that we have the final say as to who should run and how should run the church? Does the vineyard not belong to the Father, and yet we treat the Christian faith and the communion of saints as if we are not *tenants*, but *lords* of the vineyard. We will make use of it how we want, when we want. If it does not meet my

felt needs, if it does not meet my schedule, if it does not meet my desires or my theological definitions, I will dig it up, turn it over, replant the way I want so that it bears the fruit I want it to bear. (Isn't that how we're tempted to think?)

And when the servants of the vineyard owner are sent to come find the fruit God expects, what do they find? *Can* they find fruit when fruit only comes from God's plans and yet the vineyard is re-purposed to fit *our* plans? And so, don't those servants find those who ignore the divine call to repentance?... those who hold grudges against fellow Christians, gossip and ruin others' reputations? Do the sent servants find those who will sin in secret, in disbelief that God knows the heart (even though we see in our text Jesus read the heart of his fiercest opponent quite plainly)? Do the servants find those who think only of themselves, who see the communion of saints as a commodity for their self-benefit, who quietly despise preaching and Christ's Word, whose obstinance is thinly-veiled by following a Sunday morning liturgical routine? Do those servants sent by God find tenants who may repent, but only for sins seen and known by others, without much reflecting on one's status before the Divine vineyard owner?

You see, if the tenants see the relationship as primarily them with other tenants and with the servant-after-servant-after-servant being sent, they've forgotten that their responsibility and accountability is ultimately to the vineyard owner. Mistreat the

servants, send them away, kill them if you want... it doesn't deter the Father from his claim of ownership upon the Church and upon eternal life. "No problem," we say, "if we just get rid of the Son, then we get to decide how to handle the inheritance. If Christ is the head of the Church, and I cut off the head, then I can now make of the body anything I want." Isn't that what much of the Church in America is in the process of doing with its theology?, but what we also do in our inner heart! How self-absorbed must we be to convince ourselves of such an illogical conclusion? If we harm the Son, deny the Son, doubt the benefit and import of the Son, somehow the Father's going to have no choice but to give us the inheritance? That doesn't even make sense!

Friends, why try to bring Christ to **nothing** in hopes of gaining **something**, when in Christ, you share in **everything**? And you share in everything specifically because Christ did the unthinkable and the nonsensical – He was willing to give everything, to lay down everything, to sacrifice everything – for you!... to share the vineyard and the kingdom with you. How unfathomable is the love of the Son, that – knowing the reception that the prophets got and that he would get – he nevertheless willingly came. And he willingly laid down his life... St Paul says, "God shows us his love in this, that while we were yet his enemies, Christ died for us." Christ died for his enemies, not so that they could *remain* his enemies and *continue* to seize the vineyard, but so that, in repentance, their former

wickedness would not drag them into hell, but that they could turn from their ways and live – as we’ve heard God say through the prophet in this Lenten season, “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?”

I suppose, in this season of repentance, and as we prepare to meditate upon our Lord’s passion and receive – even again this hour – the fruit of his passion, true fruit, divine fruit, the choicest fruit of the vineyard... shared with us! – in light of all that, the question ought be posed for us as well: “Turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?”

I cannot choose my eternal inheritance. I cannot earn it, and I cannot take it by force. And neither can you. But that doesn’t mean you can’t be, and aren’t, an heir of the kingdom. If you are going to inherit any mercy and life for eternity, it must come freely from the compassion of God in Christ Jesus, the stone and rock and foundation of God’s Church and vineyard... and, thanks be to God, that compassion freely comes, unfathomably comes, almost ‘nonsensically’ comes. St. Paul comforts us with the gospel, “God saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by *the washing of regeneration (baptism)*... through Jesus Christ our Savior (who went willingly to the cross)... so that being justified by his grace we might become *heirs*.”

We hear the same relationship between baptism and inheritance in Galatians: “In the fullness of time, God sent forth his son (sounds a bit like the parable?)... to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive *adoption (baptism)* as sons... and if a son, then an *heir* through God” (Gal. 4:4-7).

And, a third time, to the Romans, “You have received the Spirit of *adoption as sons (baptism)*... The Spirit himself bears witness... that we are children of God, and if children, then *heirs* – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.” (Romans 8:15-17).

Now, recall, friends, that the wicked tenants desperately wanted the inheritance and they sought to claim it as their own by force. But now, as heirs – your names freely and graciously written into the book of life by the blood of Christ – as heirs and co-heirs with Christ, you have a share of and claim in the vineyard. Christ has laid down his life to be that seed that falls into the ground and raises up with it an abundant fruit of new life. As he says in our Old Testament reading, “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?” And that new thing, that new life spring forth in the Church, flowing from pulpit and altar, despite the backdrop of a dying field and world all around this new vineyard... that new thing he freely shares with you, indeed into which He has chosen you and planted you that you might bear fruit.

So, cherish it, safeguard it, and pray for strength to never reject this Church or its cornerstone, Christ Jesus and the baptismal

life of inheritance he has freely bestowed upon you. Instead, as the baptismal hymn says,

*So, use it well! You are made new -
In Christ a new creation!
As faithful Christians, live and do
Within your own vocation,
Until that day when you possess
His glorious robe of righteousness
Bestowed on you forever!*

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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