

Matthew 21:33-46  
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 8, 2023

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

Our text, Jesus concludes the parable with this explanation:  
“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our text begins with Jesus saying, “Hear *another* parable.” Begs the question, what was the *previous* parable, and why *two*? Actually, the answer is, “Not two, but three!” This is the third of three parables... not all given on the same day, but all with the common image of ‘the vineyard.’ We heard the **first** of these a few Sundays ago – the parable of the workers sent into the vineyard at various hours of the day; last week, though it wasn’t included in the Gospel reading, I mentioned the **second** parable – that of the two sons, whose father urged them to go work in his vineyard. Today, we hear the **third** ‘vineyard’ parable – the tenants entrusted with the vineyard hate those who come to collect the master’s harvest, and the tenants harm all the messengers and kill the son. And the audience hearing this third parable verbalizes the owner’s response: “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the

vineyard to others tenants who will give him the fruits in their season.”

Interestingly, only Matthew’s gospel includes the first two parables, but this third parable is so climactic, so fateful, and so revealing that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include it:

How transparent is the intent and lesson of this parable! The Lord entrusts his Church – his vineyard – to the religious leaders, but not first without that vivid description of him planting it, putting a fence around it, and digging a winepress in it, and building a tower for those who are to oversee the vineyard. Any hearer of Jesus’ day would have recognized the not-so-subtle reference to Isaiah 5, as we just heard it in the Old Testament reading: “He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it.” There’s Isaiah 5. Here, again, is Jesus’ parable: “The master of a house planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower” and then? – he leased it to tenants. And, as *Isaiah* prophesies, he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

What had these tenants done, how faithless had the religious leaders of Israel been, that that which should have yielded good fruit instead yielded bad fruit? Or, to show their faithlessness is not merely ignorance and incompetence, the details of Jesus’ parable differ a bit from Isaiah’s prophecy and Jesus says, ‘Oh yes, the vineyard bore fruit; but when the master sent servants to get his

fruit for him, the tenants proved wicked.” In other words, it wasn’t the *fruit of the vineyard* that was bad, but those *stewards of the fruit*.

The Church always bears fruit; it cannot help but bear fruit for it is God’s new creation. The vineyard of the Old Covenant may have borne wild grapes, but the vineyard of the New Testament always is bearing true fruit... not in every corner or in every church building, for how many there are who adorn themselves with the name ‘church’ but who proclaim and teach and believe a different gospel and advance wickedness. But, even where the Lord himself may admit there are weeds that grow up alongside wheat in his church (weeds to be separated from the harvest), nevertheless the Church always is bearing fruit; God is always at work. And the Holy Spirit is always creating and sustaining faith.

But, such does not mean that those entrusted with the Church are faithful. Jesus’ immediate audience were unfaithful tenants, unfaithful stewards of God’s covenant with His people. They loathed the messengers, stopped their ears to, and beat and killed, the bearers of God’s Word. And when He sent His own Son, they devised a plan to kill him and take the vineyard by force.

Such was the fruit they bore; such was the evidence of their wickedness; such was the harvest of their faithlessness. And, in response, the Lord quotes the psalm – “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” – and asserts before them

that He would overcome their hatred, He would be the keystone of His Church – even if by dying – and it would all be according to the plan of the God who would take His vineyard away from *them*, and give it to a people producing fruits... that is, fruits keeping with the people's repentance, fruits borne out of their hope in the work of Christ's cross and their joy of the forgiveness of sins.

To give them the most *mild* credit, the chief priests and pharisees at least perceived that he was speaking about them (how could they not?!). That didn't budge their stubborn impenitence, but at least they saw he was speaking of them. But, do *you* learn from their tragic example?

You see, we who so often want to see ourselves in the Biblical audience's shoes – we want to be Peter, or John, or the crowds who are healed or fed – yet, in this case, when Jesus calls to repentance His audience, we want to quickly jump out of their shoes and assume that we're the innocent bystanders shaking our heads at the religious leaders with feigned dismay: "How could you?"

But, what about us? How do you hear this parable about us? On the one hand, as the target audience are religious leaders, one might say (with some merit), "Boy, those pastors ... they sure better remain faithful to heed the messengers – the prophets and apostles – and to the Christ who has charge over them!" That's true! All pastors should be held to account – and will be by Christ himself – for how they have cared for the vineyard. These men whom God has

called to man the tower he built for his vineyard, these men called to be stewards of the wine that flows from the press that is Christ's cross – they had better be responsible with the vineyard!

On the other hand, must we not admit that the pastors also occupy the same office as *the messengers* (those sent by God before the final coming of the Son)? And, if they do, then *who* receives the messengers? Are the messengers not regularly sent to you – heirs of Christ's church, his vineyard, sharers in the wine of the press of Christ's cross – are those messengers not sent to you your entire lives? ...not just in childhood, or 'until confirmation'; but they are sent to you your entire lives to constantly preach *not just* "Jesus died on the cross. Someone else killed Jesus. Now the vineyard belongs to you"; but rather to preach to you repentance for the forgiveness of sins, that you may produce the fruit of such preaching. But *when* they preach, are we not tempted to yawn at their warning; to ignore their pleadings; to reason away their message... and, even if only in our hearts, we dismiss them, send them packing, and seek to claim ownership of our life in the vineyard – inheritance of the vineyard – by force – by forcing God's will to conform to ours.

Are we really going to be found killing the Son of the vineyard owner? The writer to the Hebrews specifically points to former Christians when he says that the impenitent – those who were once tenants, but now refuse to bear/produce the fruit of faith – are "crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding

him up to contempt.” And, if that’s the lot of the *impenitent*, then the call to us, the call to repentance is a call to escape such eternal self-harm, a call to be saved by God’s gracious forgiveness and see that the Christ whom our sins once crucified will not be held down in contempt forever, but in fact *already* (as Peter says on the day of Pentecost), “this Jesus whom you crucified God has made both Lord and Christ.”

That’s the only way we can understand rightly the psalm that Jesus quotes to explain the parable: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” *Not* the Lord’s doing that the builders rejected the Son, but the Lord’s doing that the stone the builders rejected has become (has been raised up to be cemented as) the cornerstone on which the Church is built: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” we heard Peter say in the gospel reading only a month or so ago: “On this rock (this confession), I will build my Church,” Jesus prophesied. How marvelous in our sight that the Church is built on such a firm foundation as our crucified and risen Lord.

So, repent and receive the Son the Father has sent... for Christ has truly proved himself the firm foundation of His kingdom, the cornerstone of His Church, the true heir of the vineyard. And, he even now intercedes with the Father, with the owner of the

vineyard, and effectively pleads that the Father give the vineyard over to those people producing its fruit.

That doesn't mean you are "rewarded" the vineyard because of your "good works." The verb rendered "a people producing its fruit" is a verb with present tense connection to the sentence's main verb. So, if the main verb of the sentence is *future* tense – "the kingdom of God will be... given to a people" (future tense) – then the "producing of fruit" is also a future reality.

In other words, God does not give the vineyard to you because of what you've already done for Him. He gives the vineyard to you with the plan and foreknowledge that, having been baptized into faith in Him, you will produce its fruit. So bear fruit in keeping with repentance; shed the works of the flesh, and pray for the fruits of the Spirit, meaning the fruits that come by the Holy Spirit's working of faith in your heart, bearing up love for your neighbor.

That's the "righteousness of faith" Paul describes in our epistle reading: "not 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 – that I may know Christ and the power of his resurrection" ... the power and conquering by which He dealt the fatal blow to sin and death, overcame the grave, and became the foundation of His Church. In Him, you live bearing the fruit of faith, and thus the fruit of repentance, and thus the fruit of

the kingdom. As he says, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from [the impenitent] and given to a people producing its fruits.”

This last Wednesday, about 20 of us finished our Adult Catechesis Review and were reminded that the last section of the Small Catechism’s teaching (there’s a final section of questions and answers for self-examination), but the last section of *teaching* is about bearing fruit... the Table of Duties, the fruit of ‘love of neighbor’ borne out of ‘faith in God.’ Yes, that bearing of fruit is the daily life of those who share the inheritance of the vineyard. It is, if you will, the daily-life culmination of Christ’s saving work. It is the fruit borne out of Christ’s tree of Calvary. It is the highest peak of the whole Church that has been built on the foundation and cornerstone of Christ. “The greatest of these is love,” St Paul says, not because it’s *better than* faith and hope, but because Christian love is built upon faith and hope! We preach Christ crucified, not to the *exclusion* of bearing fruits keeping with repentance, but with the *result of* bearing fruits keeping with repentance.

So, repent for the forgiveness of sins... or, as we heard it last week, “turn and live.” Live in the daily life of the vineyard, the daily life of faith in God and fervent love for one another, the daily life that dwells safely in and eagerly anticipates the inheritance of eternal life won by Christ, founded on Christ, and extolling Christ.

*In Nomine Iesu.*