

October 04, 2020 Sermon
Matthew 21:33-46

Prayer: Good and gracious God, we have floundered, we have judged and we have not been very good keepers of your vineyard of late. We would like to blame it on the virus, but you know us better than that. Help us to be better tenders of your vines and produce fruit that is worthy of your name. In the loving name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

This is *quite* the gospel lesson as we gather back to worship from a very long hiatus! I mean, if we want violence and death and everything that goes *with* it, all we have to do is watch a cable news network and it's *all* laid out for us.

And you know what? Maybe it IS all laid out for us. *Maybe* what we're seeing on our favorite cable news show is *evidence* of how the vineyard is being tended these days, and maybe *our* opinions that we either keep to ourselves, or share with one another is even MORE evidence of how *we* are tending the vineyard, these days.

Here was this landowner who planted a vineyard and provided *everything* that went *with* creating a vineyard, *including* a watchtower; leased it to tenants and then went to another country. We aren't told where he went or why, just that he went. If we are good detectives, we will figure out that he was gone for quite some time because it takes about three years for a vineyard to produce grapes, so we know he was gone at *least* three years and *maybe* more.

I guess that gives his tenants plenty of time to make the place their own. We are not told the owner came back to check on it at any time, and after you have been the sole caregiver of property for *any* amount of time, if you're a good and caring tenant, the property is treated as your own, or *so* one would think. And I'll *bet* that's what the landowner thought when he went off to wherever he went off to. I'll bet he thought the tenants were going to treat the vineyard as if it were their own.

Isn't that what we expect if we have a house or a piece of property that we're leasing to someone? We *expect*, if it's a house, they will keep it as they would keep a house they *own*. That's not always the way it works and that's why, sometimes rent is high or why an owner asks for first and last month's rent before letting someone move into their property. This insures there will be money to take care of accidents that happen in the home that cause damage to your property.

Now, back to the property owner. Harvest time had come so he sent his slaves to collect the harvest of grapes, but the tenants grabbed the slaves, beat one, killed another and *stoned* yet another. Following that, the landowner sent in even *more* slaves and *they* were met in the same fashion.

The landowner, not knowing what else to do, sent his *son*. He sent his son because he assumed the tenants would have *respect* for him, but the tenants had *other* thoughts. They said, "Ohhhh he's sending his *son* now. If we kill *him* then we'll get what HE was supposed to get and we'll be sittin' high on the hog!" So, they grabbed the son, *threw* him out of the vineyard and *killed* him.

Jesus *then* asks his disciples what they think will happen to the tenants when the owner comes. The disciples tell him that the owner will put the tenants to death and *lease* the vineyard to *other* tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time.

What is that angry response we hear on occasion??? If **you** can't do it, I'll find *someone* who *will*?!

The parable, is, of course, reminiscent of God sending Jesus to die for us, right?

Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and *it will crush anyone* on whom it *falls*."

Those who fall upon the stone...those who *attempt* to break Christ, will be *broken*, themselves. There are *consequences* of hindering the kingdom of God.

There is *danger* and *cost* in turning against Christ and there is a *forewarning* in this parable that *God* is always at work.

Our *ethics* and *our morals* are challenged *each and every* day of our lives, and it *doesn't* get any easier as we get older. We are the *tenants* of the *kingdom* of God. We are *here* to be responsible stewards of the vineyard, to be *good* tenants that produce *good* fruits. *God*, though not considered to be far from us at any time, gives us enough *space* to do our own thing, that we *sometimes* get into trouble. We make *mistakes*, and *sometimes* fail to bear fruit.

Our nation, right now, is divided. For *whatever* reason, we are labeling *others* as we are being labeled. Are *you* in the group that's considered the *in* group or are you considered to be the group that's *outcast*? Do you even *know*? Did you even *realize* you were being labeled? Well you are. *We all* are. And because of these groupings and these labelings, there is more violence in our country than there has been in *a very long* time.

God knows that violence will *always* be part of the kingdom. It will be part of the kingdom because we are *human* and God gave us *all* that *rope*, you know. So, we are going to disagree with one another from time to time. There will be times when the branches of the vineyard will produce withering vines or sour grapes because that's part of our lives together. But there will *also* be times when those withering vines will make way for NEW vines, and *new* hope and a *better* crop. We're all different, with differing ideas and plans.

BUT, if we are to be good tenants and good caretakers of God's kingdom; if we are to produce good fruits of the spirit, then the only label we need to worry about is the label of being *children of God*. There have been many people in the past who have been involved in losing their lives in order for there to be justice. There will be those in the *future* who will also lose their lives because we can never stop working in God's vineyard if we want love, and peace and harmony and justice.

We must find a way to be *accepting* of *all* people, without shoving each other into a group or category and slapping a label on it. When we reject God's people, we are rejecting the God who made them, and that's what we are being told to watch out for in this scripture, today. Believe it or not, we are ALL in this vineyard, together! We are ALL tenants. We are ALL expected to do our share to raise a good crop.

Last weekend, I officiated a wedding for one of my former youth and I had the pleasure of meeting one of the grandmothers. She was one of the sweetest people I've ever known. In fact, five minutes into the conversation, she gave me a little peck on the cheek. She started out by asking me if I knew where she was from. Well, I KNEW she was from Wisconsin, but I *also* knew that wasn't what she was asking. She had a thick accent, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

She introduced herself to me as "Jackie" and shared with me, in a most delightful way, that she was originally from France. She ended up in the United States because her husband had been a soldier. They met when he was in France during the war. I can't begin to capture the joy in her voice with this sermon, but that's what it was...pure joy!

As tears welled up in her eyes, she relayed to me that if it hadn't been for the United States, France would have just gone away, and it would be no more. Jackie also told me that she hated to leave France and that she was very scared coming to the United States as a new bride, but she also said people were very friendly and kind to her. Then she said, as new tears welled up again, "France will always be my home, but the United States will *always* be my *hero*."

So how are we doing with the whole vineyard thing? Is our religion fruitless? What are we doing right now, today, to grow the kingdom of God? We're probably not doing as good of a job as we'd like to think we're doing. The growth of God's kingdom will be stunted if we continue to trample on the powerless, rather than lift them up. It does us absolutely no good to slap a label on someone, and honestly, it breaks God's heart when we do that.

We need to make a change. We need to take it seriously when we recite our confession. Do you *think* about what you're saying or have you said it so many times that it means nothing, now? When we say, "God, we have not loved you with our whole heart, and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves," that's a mouthful. It's taking a step in the direction we should go, and we should *remember* that *confession* and the *forgiveness* we received even as we leave this building, today.

There will *always* be turmoil. There will *always* be strife, and there will *probably* always be labeling, but we must *begin* to better understand how we're going to take care of God's people. We must begin to better understand that the world is *not us* against **them**, but **us together**. It **must** be that way for the kingdom to grow and flourish. The *good* news is that we are *not* alone in any of this. God is right beside us, prepared to give us strength and courage to go on with what we need to do, when we need to do it. All we need to do is ask as we heard the Psalmist ask, today. "Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved." Amen.