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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, Montana
18th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Matthew 21:33-46

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

Today we have another challenging parable. Another analogy in which we feel compelled to decide not only who God is, but who we are in this story.

These parables are tricky, in part because we need to learn about their historical context in order to determine what they might say to us today. Now, I say “these” parables because the one we have today is one of three that Jesus tells to the chief priests and elders to point out how they have missed the boat in their callings as leaders of God’s people.

Last Sunday was the parable of the two sons, one who said he would not do the will of his father, but changed his mind and did what he was asked, and the other who gave lip service to his father, but never got around to doing the work.

Today we have this parable, sometimes known as the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. But we need a quick history lesson to help us see what this parable might say to Christians in the 21st century.

Historically, the nation of Israel was described as God’s vineyard, particularly by the prophets, like Isaiah. So, when Jesus uses the image of the vineyard in this parable his listeners would have recognized that he is talking about them, their people, God’s people.

For a time, God sent prophets who were called to bring God’s word to the people, like the servants who were sent to the vineyard in the parable. The tenants in the vineyard are the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, the chief priests and elders, who were supposed to be caring for God’s people, but seemed to be more concerned about preserving their position, both in the temple and in relationship to Rome.

It would be easy for us to say that people in leadership, especially in the church, are called to a higher standard. That’s as true today as it was in the time of Jesus’ ministry on earth. But is this parable only about the leaders of the Jewish church long ago? We claim the Holy Scriptures to be God’s living word. What might this parable have to say to us, whether we hold a specific leadership role in the church or not?

First, the image of the vineyard can still work for us today. In holy baptism when we were welcomed into the family of God, we became part of God’s holy people, from Israel to the early Christians to those we live and worship with each Sunday.

Remember that Israel became a nation from the descendants of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. When God called Abraham and Sarah out of their homeland to a new land, God promised to bless them so that they would be a blessing to all the world. The image of the vineyard paints a picture of God’s people thriving and connected, and blessing the world with the fruit they bear. In this parable Jesus calls it the fruits of the kingdom.

The vineyard, then, is for us the kingdom of God—not a kingdom just of the future, but the kingdom of every generation, God’s beloved people meant to bless others with God’s goodness and life.

Next, it’s important to notice in this parable that the landowner who plants the vineyard also provides for its well-being. He put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, built a watchtower, and then assigned some tenants the responsibility of caring for it.

God has planted the kingdom all over the world for centuries. We are given God’s Word to set our boundaries, teaching us who we are and how we are set apart for God’s good purposes. Like the wine press, God gives us work to do, each according to the gifts we have been given.

The watchtower could serve as a way for God’s kingdom to keep perspective, looking beyond ourselves to see both the threats to the kingdom life and the opportunities to share what we have with the world around us.

Finally, this parable reminds us that God is the owner of the vineyard, the Creator of the kingdom, the source of all we have—our life, our relationships, and our work and growth in the kingdom of God. It is out of thanksgiving to God that we produce the fruit that is meant to be shared with others.

This week our Confirmation youth began learning about the Ten Commandments, the first three that teach how we are to love God, and the fourth about honoring our parents—and those in authority, as Luther explains in the catechism. And I wish I had been clearer with them about this part, so confirmands, pay attention here!

We love God first and most because we recognize that God is the source of our life. God has given us everything for our good. And when we appreciate God’s generosity, we show our love to God by the ways we speak to and about God, the ways we take time to worship and rest, and the ways we respect the leaders God has placed among us.

It might seem easy to see ourselves as only the vines in God’s vineyard. We are meant to grow and produce fruits of love and care for others. And this is true.

We can also see ourselves as the tenants in God’s vineyard. We are not all called to be pastors or bishops, but we each find ourselves in leadership roles in which we are called to care for others so that they can bear the fruit of the kingdom as best they can.

What is the section of God’s kingdom you have been called to tend?

Some of us have been called to leadership roles in the life of the church as council members, committee members, teachers or Bible study leaders in which we help one another grow and thrive in this kingdom life.

We tend to the lives of our family members—as parents to our children, as brothers or sisters, or children caring for aging parents. We care for the well-being of our friends and neighbors, and even our pets or livestock and the land or property where we live.

Our confirmation youth talked about being a team captain or a babysitter. Even if we are not always the leader or caregiver, there are moments when we are given that role by God to bless others out of the blessings we have received.

The role of the tenant in our parable was to care for the vineyard so that it would bear good fruit—in part, as a way to give thanks to the owner of the vineyard, and in part to bless the community around it with good wine.

The roles we are given as God's people are given in trust by God, to help those around us grow into the fullness of who God created them to be. And when we do, we point the world to our loving and generous God.

We need help to live in the kingdom as God intends. So, God sent the Son, Jesus Christ, to teach us and guide us and work with us, and remind us who we are and to whom we belong.

How might you care for the kingdom of God today?

How might we as a congregation be more attentive to the work God has given us to do together?

Let us embrace our identity as God's people, producing the fruits of the kingdom in thanksgiving to God and as gifts for the world.

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

With confidence in God's grace and mercy, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

Holy God, we pray for the church: for our bishop, our pastors and deacons, and our own congregation. You call us to work for peace and justice in your vineyard. Refresh the church with your life, that we may bear fruit through work and service. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Thank you for the abundant harvest of the earth. Bless and care for those whose hands bring the fruits of the earth to the tables of all who hunger. May we be inspired by your servants who have cared deeply for your creation, especially Francis of Assisi, whom we commemorate today. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Curb the impulses of greed and pride that lead us to take advantage of others. Grant that world leaders seek the fruits of the kingdom for the good and welfare of all people. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Sustain all who suffer with the promise of new life. Assured of your presence, heal our pain and suffering, and equip us to embrace all bodies aching for wholeness of mind, body, and soul. We call to mind those who are struggling today, especially President and Mrs. Trump and all who are laid low by the coronavirus, those listed in our bulletin today, and others we name now in our hearts. *Wait*
Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Thank you for the saints who have taught us to live faithfully in your vineyard (*especially...*).
May we carry on the work of the kingdom until our labor is complete.
Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Listen as we call on you, O God, and enfold in your loving arms all for whom we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.