## Matthew 21:33-46

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? 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.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Oh, dear. This story about the vineyard is in Matthew's gospel and the word gospel means “good news” or “glad tidings” but this story does not sound like glad tidings at all. There is so much violence and at the end a judgment that puts the fear of God into church leaders who increasingly feel threatened by Jesus. The characters and settings of all of today's stories point to first-century social and economic realities: agriculture, harvest, absentee landlords, working the land and owning the land, escalating violence, slaves and kings, the poor who are never invited and have no coat to wear, and the shocking impact of eating together at an open table—ignoring boundaries of class and culture. Twenty centuries have not changed us so much that we cannot learn something from these early truths.

Jesus' story goes like this: a landowner plants some grape vines, puts up a fence, digs a wine press and builds a tower so guards can protect the whole set-up. Then he leases the vineyard to tenant farmers and goes away. When harvest time rolls around, the landowner sends some slaves to gather the fruit of his vines, but the tenants have grown greedy. They don't want to hand over the grapes and wine so they kill the slaves and they kill the next ones the owner sends. The owner decides then to send his son, figuring that the tenants will respect the son or that at least they won't risk angering the father any further. But those tenants murder the son, too, says Jesus. And then he asks the temple leaders what they think will happen to the tenants when the landowner shows back up at the vineyard. The priests respond in righteous indignation that the tenants should be killed and the vineyard put into the care of new tenants who will know their place and hand over the crop when it is ready.

Most likely these church leaders don't recognize themselves in the story, so Jesus is explicit. “The vineyard is the kingdom I have given you to tend. You have forgotten that you are tenants in God's kingdom and not the owners. Not only that, you have totally wrecked what has been put in your hands. You have no respect for the earth, for God's ways of justice and peace, for one another. So the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to people who will produce its fruits.” That's all the priests and Pharisees need to hear. They are not like tenants who disobeyed their landowner. They are those whom God has hand-chosen to tend God's church. They are educated biblical scholars, not hourly workers who would rather slough off than do the hard work of the kingdom. The men want to arrest Jesus on the spot, but decide to pick a more strategic time to do so. Make no mistake about it: they *will* shut him down.

It's interesting that Matthew chose to include this story in his gospel. The Christian church is in its infancy. Rather than tell the parable of the disobedient tenants strictly as a history lesson, there appears to be here a word of disapproval directed at these first Christians. The good news of Jesus Christ has been handed over to them as a precious gift. They are to tend it carefully, to cherish it and to grow it in thanksgiving to God. Instead Matthew suggests that the early Christians have hoarded what they have been given. They have made themselves judges over the gospel and have decided with whom it should and should not be shared. They have erected walls to keep themselves together and to keep out those they fear. Matthew's gospel was written in the first century. How could the Christian church have messed things up so quickly and what does that say about us almost two thousand years later?

We Lutherans like to think of the church, or at least our little part of it, as evolving and improving over time. Thanks to Martin Luther, we no longer extort money from the poor so they can buy their way into heaven. We have sent missionaries all over the world and countless people have come to know Jesus through them. Thanks to Luther and all those missionaries, many in the world have the Word of God available to them in their native tongues. We continue to begin mission churches in this country. We educate our pastors in seminaries. We have a web of disaster response that circles the globe, as we have seen in the most recent hurricane devastation. Other church bodies would probably readily agree with us: we have come a long way in 500 years. Or have we?

What about all the wars fought in the name of religion? What about the violence so influenced by Old Testament insistence on an eye for eye while we ignore Jesus' call to turn the other check and pray for our enemies? What about the reckless ways in which we have destroyed the earth God has given us, the ways in which we have ripped out its contents to fuel our selfish needs? What about all the times we stand silent while abuse takes place around us – abuse of power, abuse of creation, abuse of women, abuse of the most vulnerable, abuse of the holy word of life placed in our hands? We deserve to have the kingdom of God taken away from us and given to those who will do a better job with it. We even deserve to be banished from the face of the earth so God can start again from scratch. That could very well be our take-away from this story if it weren't for the message beneath the message. Yes, we have done a dismal job of caring for the kingdom entrusted to us. Yet, in that fateful time when Jesus is killed in the name of religion, God does not smite us. God instead turns the most monumental moment of death in history into life, into forgiveness and justice and grace. Despite the reality that we have made of mess of the world, often especially through the use of the sword of religion, Jesus proclaims a God who continues to plant and cultivate God's vineyard. When God's son is murdered, wine flows again from his blood, for not even we disobedient losers can stop the wild, abundant growth of love and justice. So boundless is God's forgiveness that Jesus says to us again and again, “I am the Vine and you are the branches. Abide in me and you will bear much fruit.”

What is that fruit? We are heirs of the Beatitudes Jesus, so the fruit of his vines is blessing upon those whom he loves so fiercely and whom he knows receive so little from the world around them: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers.

Isn't it remarkable that the one who was killed in such a violent way comes bearing peace? He tells us all, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” And “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” And “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” And, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

God, the owner of the vineyard, is in it for the long haul. God has made an eternal commitment to the land, to God's people and to generations to come. God is even now planting vines that will one day bear fruit, that will bear sweeter and sweeter fruit the longer they remain in the vineyard. Your work and mine might last just a blink of God's eye, but in that blink, we are entrusted with the most holy of holies: the peace and justice of God, to be shared with those who suffer the most around us. So, from this story of disobedience and death, God gives the promise of aged wine, sustained harvest to be shared with the most vulnerable, those from whom the world strives to take away dignity and safety and worth. It is, in a way, a story of what we have made the most sour vinegar being turned into exquisite wine, served at a table at which there is room enough for all. Good, glad tidings indeed.

Amen.

*Pentecost 18A*

*October 8, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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