

Managers not Owners!
16th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Steven D. Spencer – Pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church

Matthew 21:33–46

"Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. 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 have his inheritance.' And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore 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 let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." 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 marvelous in our eyes'? 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." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Our text takes place just days before Jesus death. And the audience is the notorious spiritual leaders of Israel called the Sanhedrin. Those high powered chief priest and elders that desire nothing less than complete control of the people and of course Jesus death.

The imagery of 21st chapter of Matthew is very similar to that of Isaiah chapter 5. They have in common: The vineyard, the tower, a wine press. God had done absolutely everything for Israel. God is patient and long-suffering. But where they differ is that Isaiah 5 speaks of all of Israel where Matthew stresses Israel's leadership. Isaiah stresses Israel's fruitlessness where the Gospel stresses the rebellious attitude of Israel's leaders.

The master of the house planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants. This parable is full of simile and allegory. To properly understand it we need to break out those components. The master of the house, the planter and creator of the vineyard is God. He created all things and continues to preserve them.

Maybe you remember learning in Catechism classes the Creed's First Article, that one concerning creation. Listen carefully.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean?--Answer.

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason, and all my senses, and still preserves them; in addition thereto, clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and homestead, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods; that He provides me richly and daily with all that I need to support this body and life, protects me from all danger, and guards me and preserves me from all evil; and all this out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I owe it to Him to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

God created it all. He is the owner, the master of the vineyard and of the universe. The vineyard represents the Old Testament theocracy where church and state were not separated but were one. The tower represents the prophetic watchmen looking for the coming of the Messiah. At one time the tower was the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the place where men of God eagerly studied Scripture searching for information which would lead them to the signs of the coming Messiah.

The winepress many believe represents Jerusalem. For from the Holy city will come the fruit of God, a blessed sacrament of forgiveness. That leads us to the fence; some Bible versions translate this as a wall or a hedge. It really doesn't matter. The most common type of hedge in Israel at that time was a thorny bush that grew so dense nothing could penetrate it. The Greek word is φραγμὸν frag-mon and is translated fence.

This fence stands for the Law and the covenant. It surrounded Israel to separate the Jews from the Gentiles. It is spiritual code as well as a moral code. It directs God's people to worship only one God and to never misuse His name. It encourages a regular day of worship and rest. But it's also a moral code of decency. For it instructs children to obey their fathers and mothers and for all of us to honor those in placed in authority over us. Through the Fifth Commandment God's people are guided to cherish life by not murdering or wishing harm to anyone. And in the Sixth Commandment God points us to the importance of a monogamous marriage and warns of the abuse of adultery. The seventh commandment leads us to treat our neighbor fairly by not stealing property either by willful act or manipulation and wrongful dealing. In light of the sermon title and proper understanding of today's Scripture "We are managers and not owners", when someone steals they are not just stealing from that person but they are truly stealing from God.

The Eighth Commandment points us to another type of stealing, the stealing of a person's reputation by bearing false witness. This commandment points us to put the best possible construction on everything. Rather than jumping to conclusion, backbiting and gossiping this commandment encourages us to build-up those around us rather than tear them down.

That finally brings us to the Ninth and Tenth Commandments the "Thou Shall Not Covet." Luther said the 9th and 10th Commandments were written so that the Pietistic, the Holy than Thou, person inside of us should not become puffed up. We might be able to fool ourselves into believing that we have obeyed God's Commandments but when we get to the 9th and 10th Commandments we are crushed. To covet is nothing more than desiring to own or have something. We are desirous people, we want what we want and we want it now. During fellowship time you may look across the table and think, "I wanted that piece of cake" coveting. As you drive out of the parking lot you may look at the car next to yours "you're probably not parked next to me" and say "I would like to have that car" coveting. It's so easy to covet. It's not a matter of longing and lusting it's just a simple desire.

So how well do you obey all those Commandments? These codes, this fence that was placed around the children of God separated them from the Gentile world. It was there for their protection and to make them a unique people set aside by God.

The master of the house planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants. The point is that the vineyard lacked absolutely nothing. That brings us to the last element represented in the parables, the last the tenants.

Other translations say the property was "rented or let it out." The point is that God alone owned it. He loaned it to the farmers. Leasing, in application, does not mean that God removed Himself or that He did not care, but rather that He entrusted everything to Israel as responsible recipients of the covenant. He trusted them.

At harvest time the master sent servants with a specific commission. "Servants" means God's special emissaries, especially the Prophets. Note that the text speaks of "his" fruits, the owner's fruits. The parable does not speak of share-croppers, as some paraphrased Bibles mistakenly imply. All the fruits belong to God. The fruit, in this case, denotes contrition, faith and the spiritual fruit thereof. In other words, spiritual obedience, God expects that.

But wicked tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned the third one. The tenants did the opposite of the Lord's will. The master's servants were sent to receive the fruits. Which we know means repentance, faith and obedience to God. But the workers violently abused those sent servants; they even stoned the 3rd one. By the way, only blasphemers were to be stoned. They were treated them as blasphemers! Then the master sent yet others servants more than the first time.

Under ordinary circumstances no landowner would send more after what happened to the first ones. This clearly portrays God's mercy and long suffering. This period of sent servants lasted from Moses, the first prophet, until the John the Baptizer, the last prophet, 1500 B.C. to the time of Christ, fifteen centuries!! 13 were sent from 900 B.C. to 600 B.C. alone. The more wicked Israel became, the more prophets God sent. During the exile there were two, Daniel and Ezekiel, 600-570 B.C. After the exile there were three, from 520-400 B.C. And finally there was just one, John the Baptizer. And we all know his fate.

The words "beat, killed, stoned" are figurative for a violent, for a rebellious attitude, not all were actually killed. The words "***did the same to them***" says much. It was a constant and unchanging attitude of the religious leaders.

And now last of all the master sends his son. '***They will respect my son***' our text says. The word respect in the Greek is ἐντρέπω (entrepo) like to in trepid. To be filled with fear, awe. It is often translated Reverence. They will reverence my son, they will respect my son out of fear. No ordinary landowner would have done this. The patience of God is pictured in unusual imagery, especially in this verse "last of all." The meaning of "they" is obvious to us, as it must have been obvious to Jesus' hearers as well.

Matthew 21:38 says: "***But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.'***" The King James version says: "***let us seize his inheritance***". It's a violent act, murder and theft. If you haven't figured it out, the tenants in the parable are the Sanhedrin.

They knew precisely who He was, even so they denied Him. They sinned and acted against better judgment. It was unanimous. They knew the heir. Christ is truly the Heir of all things. Through the Savior they already were heirs. But they rejected that. The point is that they wanted to hold Israel on their own terms. They wanted to be in control. They didn't want to be managers they wanted to be owners.

They plot against the son in the fear that He will wrestle from them the authority they had usurped. They might have known Him to be the Heir, but they opposed His right to rule and receive the fruit of faith. They killed Jesus because they feared to lose their own positions. The Sanhedrin was horrified at the thought of people believing in Jesus. Listen to the words of the Sanhedrin as recorded in Saint John's Gospel 11:48: "***If we let Him (Jesus) alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.***" They weren't concerned about peoples spiritual well being, they were concerned about self.

Jesus is telling them about what was and was coming. Hebrews 1 says: ***God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds***". The religious rulers had killed many of the prophets refusing to hear and heed the word of God. But God is merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He sent His Son to collect what is rightfully due, repentance, faith and salvation for His people.

Just a few days after our text, Jesus will be taken outside of vineyard of Jerusalem and cast onto a hill name Golgotha. There He will be killed and His prophesy will be fulfilled. But the question still stands "***Therefore, 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 let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.***"

In verse 43 Jesus says: "***Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits***".

"Therefore" *given to a people producing its fruits*". What are the fruits? Those are contrition, repentance and faith.

Contrition - to be sorry for our sin. To realize we too desire to be owners and not just managers of God's creation. We like the Sanhedrin want to be in control, we hold to everything we have as if it were ours and not God's.

We should repent. We should confess our constant failure and struggle with sin. We truly have sinned against God in thought word and deed.

Fruit of Faith. Faith knows that you are an heir of salvation because of what Jesus has done. Faith that knows God is the creator and owner of all things and is still active in His creation. Faith that knows He went to the cross for you. And because faith is a gift from God it is sure and true.

And know this, the Kingdom of God has been given to you. For in Christ Jesus all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit, and you have eternal life, in Jesus name. Amen and Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN