

Matthew 21:33-46

Jesus said to the people, "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. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 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."

42 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'?"

43 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. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Matthew 21: 33-46, October 5, 2008, A

This is a very difficult passage. I struggled with this a good bit wondering how can I relate this ancient story with its fenced in vineyard and winepress and tower and its wicked vinedressers who kill the landowners servants just trying to do their job, and then his very son,

to our modern day situation;

to our modern, business or corporate existence,

to our society woven together with the technologies of the internet, broadcast media and travel.

The parable certainly speaks to Jesus day, and the way the setting is described would have been very relevant to the people of Jesus' day.

The Chief Priests and elders would have immediately heard the story of Israel's relationship with God in the parable.

They would have recognized all the prophets God sent to them who were killed;

In fact the end of the passage tells us that they realized Jesus was talking about them and wanted to arrest Him, but were afraid of the crowd because they regarded Him as a prophet.

But how do you transport that story to our time and place and situation?

We are caught in a trap because the academic community has named this story
the parable of “The Wicked Vine Dressers.”

I have to ask who is the real central character in this parable, and what else might we name it?

What if we changed our focus. What if we asked a different question? What if we asked,
“What does this parable teach us about God?”

What if we called this parable,
“The Parable of the Ever Patient Landowner”; or “The Ever Sacrificing Landowner?”
or the “Crazy in Love Landowner.”

Isn't Jesus trying to teach the Chief priests and temple elders something about God here,
and get them to see the landowner's son standing in their presence, standing there before them.

What is going on with this landowner, anyway?
What is his motivation in sending all these messengers, and then his own son to these tenants when they act the way they do?

Could it be that he never gives up on reaching out to them and having a relationship with them?

This landowner is willing to risk everything to reach out to these tenants.

He acts more like a loving parent reaching out to his wayward child than he does a business man.

We can only begin to grasp the magnitude of the landowner's sacrifice as we read this parable through the lens of this new question.

“What does this parable teach us about God?”

The landowner gave all that was most precious to him to reach out to these tenants, even his son.

So did our God.

Our God loves that much.

It is true that the landowner, God, is the central character in the parable, but we cannot simply choose to ignore the tenants.

You might have figured out already that in this parable they represent the people of Israel in history and even as they stand before Jesus,
and us today.

The landowner simply wanted what he was due from the tenants who leased his land.

The parable doesn't say what was due, only that the slaves were sent to collect his produce.
We have to assume that the customary arrangements were agreed to by the landowner and the tenants.

But the tenants don't want to give him anything.

This parable is about God's loving relationship with His people and what He,
has been willing, and is now willing to sacrifice for them as the cross of Jesus' crucifixion is now in sight, just a few days away.

But it is also about giving God what is due.

The landowner prepared the vineyard, put everything in place for the tenants and all they had to do was show up and work the vineyard,
and give what was owed to the landowner.

That is a relationship that is pretty clear for us in this day and age.

That is a message that easily relates
to our modern day situation;
to our modern, business or corporate existence,

to our society woven together with the technologies of the internet, broadcast media and travel.

It relates easily to our life and our faith.

It is God who has put everything in place for you to have a life of bearing fruit, a life of fulfillment.

It is God who gave you every gift you have to make you fruitful;

intellect, emotions, skills, talents vocation,
community, relationship with family,.

He has reached out to you, loved you, sent so many into the world to bear the gospel message who were killed by the world, rejected.

He gave up His Son for you.

What is due?

Gratitude, faithfulness, love, worship, service and in fact, all you have is to be counted as having been given for you to use for a while in this life.

Last week we had a congregation meeting and most of you were here for that.

We introduced a Long Range Plan that is before council to consider for approval,
and that will be presented to you for your approval and commitment to support in our next congregation meeting.

This is our work in the Vineyard.

We also addressed the proposal to have a group from outside to help us with our Stewardship Program this year at a cost, so that we would have the funding needed to carry out this plan.

That proposal was rejected, and that is fine because here is what I experienced and observed at that meeting.

I saw an excitement and enthusiasm that I haven't seen here in some time. There was a sense of commitment to support our ministry here.

A number of people got up and talked about how attainable these goals are, and how little it takes if everyone pitches in.

We had at least 8 people stand up and volunteer to serve on our Stewardship Team this year.

I know we can successfully follow through and accomplish everything God is calling us to;
our work in His vineyard.

You know, whether we have someone to come and help us or not, everything that matters comes down to one thing:
us and our relationship with God.

We still have to do the work. We still have to give back to God what He has given;
the first fruits of our work.

We are going to have a very active stewardship program this year.

You will all need to participate, to commit, to give.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus says to the Chief Priests and elders,

“...the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.”

You may tend to hear that as threatening language, but for us it is truly the language of grace.

God gives us the kingdom, He gives us the vineyard and everything we need to be fruitful.

All we have to do is get it done.

In this ministry we have been given a great gift and opportunity to be fruitful.

We can't let this opportunity go by because this gift is given out of God's love and grace;

love and grace of God beyond our imagining!
beyond our comprehension!

Amen