

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (a)
Isaiah 5:1-7 Philippians 3:4b-14 Matthew 21:33-46
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
October 4, 2020

Jesus' parable of the rebellious tenants in the vineyard made me remember the cautionary tale of a Lutheran congregation who, back in the 80s, received millions of dollars as a gift from the estate of a long-time member who died. What a beautiful, incredibly generous gift. So how did it become a curse? How could such an amazing gift turn into an albatross hanging around that congregation's neck?

Well, short answer: they didn't give it back to God. They didn't turn that new, incredible resource into worship. They didn't give it away towards God's mission, they didn't make it a tool of ministry. Instead, they tried to *protect themselves* with the gift. Long story short: everyone had 500 different opinions, of course, on what to do with the gift. But they were united in the false belief that now they owned it. And they ended up sitting on it. They basically put it into a savings account. Remember the fool who put everything in storage barns in the other parable Jesus tells. This congregation started paying their electric and water bills out of this gift, thinking that it was going to preserve them for the next 50 years. That's what we can do with God's gifts—we can turn them into formaldehyde.

A new pastor came to that congregation in the late 90s. He quickly realized that that pile of wealth sitting there had basically turned into garbage, because it gave the congregation a completely false sense of security; it had virtually sucked the life out of their outreach and ministry. Death was creeping in everywhere. For five years this pastor's main mission in life was to persuade them to stop relying on the formaldehyde to preserve them, and to trust God, the gushing fountain, from whom all blessings continually flow. He did an amazing job, as it turned out. A decade later, that congregation had new life and real vitality. It was a beautiful

shift, from the attitude of “let’s just keep ourselves alive,” to “let’s trust God and actively share our gifts in every way we can.”

Today’s scripture readings are all over it. We receive this good vineyard from God. But sin does something to us. Instead of seeing ourselves as workers in the vineyard, we deceive ourselves into thinking we’re the owners. But since deep down, we know we’re really not the owners—we have this basic sense of insecurity, so we grab hold of everything tightly, keep tight hold of our resources and gifts. But as scripture teaches us throughout: Anything in our hands that is not given back to God’s glory, anything we do with our stuff—material and spiritual—that does not reflect that relationship of honor and worship towards the Giver, becomes worthless. We produce “wild grapes,” to use Isaiah’s words. In fact, what was meant to be a gift becomes a ball and chain, binding us to stagnation and death.

In Jesus’ parable, notice how the people inside the vineyard are so caught up in their own fear and their need to control life, that they see everything that comes their way from outside the vineyard as a threat. I think of the scene in whatever movie it is where the main characters are in a dark alley, and they’re scared to death because they see this shadow approaching them. The shadow of a huge hairy beast with fangs...they see it projected on the wall of the opposite building, and they know it’s coming towards them. But when it appears around the corner, it’s a Yorkshire terrier.

That’s how sin can make us see God as he comes to us to bring us his word of life and truth. When we are trapped in this protective bubble that we’ve made for ourselves—a social bubble, a wealth bubble, a status bubble, a reputation bubble—a little world where we think the spiritual and material wealth is ours...then when God comes to call us out of that bubble, and into his service in the vineyard, we experience that call as a threat to our very being.

That's what is going on with those workers in the vineyard. The owner sends servants, one after the next, to speak to them and make his rightful claim over what is his. He finally sends his own son, not as a punisher, but as someone they can respect. Think of that: he's putting himself on the level with them—he doesn't need to do that. He could send the police if he wanted, but instead he speaks to them personally through his own flesh and blood. But all they see, again, is a threat. All they see is someone coming to TAKE from them. And they respond by killing him.

Another analogy: Any of us who have dealt with addiction in our family or are recovering from addiction ourselves know exactly what Jesus is showing us here. It's commonplace for an addict to regard the people who love him most as his biggest enemies. Because they are the ones who make him to see his true powerlessness. They are the ones who, because they love him, keep trying to break his bubble of self-protection. They are the ones who hold him up to the truth mirror. So here you are, trying to be a sweet golden retriever towards the one you love. All he sees is a wolf.

We all try to construct that self-protective bubble, especially when we're feeling the weak spots in our armor. It hurts to hear we have to change our ways, change our attitudes, change our habits. If it were just an enemy who pointed out your failings, it'd be easy—you might just ignore them or point out their weaknesses in return. But when the criticism comes from someone who loves you, it hurts. True love, true grace, is so often hard for us. It's not easy to accept pure grace in a sinful broken world.

To accept the prescription for my illness, I have to face the fact that I'm sick. The gospels—John in particular—describe the story of Jesus in those terms. The world lives in darkness. When Jesus comes, we don't want to see ourselves in his light. We don't want to see what we're supposed to be. He came to save. But all the world saw in Him was a judgment on itself. So it

resisted Him, and ultimately killed Him. In doing that, it fully condemned itself to death. You and I fall under that final judgment in our baptism into Christ. But in that water of death, you and I have been called out through the Easter door that Jesus has opened for us, into a new life based on nothing but God's forgiveness and grace. A beautiful, new, fearless life.

Finally, did you notice, there's a watchtower in the vineyard. A high place where you can climb up and see all around for a long distance. I always think one of the big reasons that the people in the gospel rejected everyone who came to them—the reason they saw wolves approaching when it was actually golden retrievers, is because no one was manning the watchtower. They'd forgotten the big picture. All they saw was an immediate threat, when it was really God, calling them to be the workers they were created to be.

Where is the watchtower in this world today? It is God's church. It's one of our most important jobs as workers in the vineyard—to man the watchtower, and to help people understand who is really in charge of the harvest. People make God into someone he is not. We can so easily make him into nothing but a judge. We can confuse him with worldly powers. We can try to ignore him. We can think death is the biggest power out there. We can construct a bubble around our lives and possessions and whatever it is we're holding onto, and then spend our lives defending it until it's all gone. But you and are doing our work in the vineyard on a completely new foundation. A promise from the living God who keeps speaking to us through His word, through his sacraments, through his people. Trust in me, he says. The new foundation, Jesus Christ, changes everything. Suddenly we're free to work in the vineyard as servants, and we can let the real owner take care of the harvest. We can give all we have to him and experience the miracle, when it all comes back to us a thousand-fold.