

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost. The scripture text is taken from Matthew 21:33-46

The story is told of a guy who was crossing the street to visit his neighbor. As he started to cross the street, a car was bearing down on him, so he stopped and backed up to the curb. The car stopped, so he started to cross the street, and the car moved toward him. He changed direction and went back to the curb and the car moved toward him. Then, he tried to run across the street and the car swerved in that direction. As he moved left, the car moved left, as he moved right, the car moved right. Finally, the guy just stopped in the middle of the street. The car screeched to a stop, right in front of him. So he walks around to the driver's side of the car, and as the window came down, to his surprise, a squirrel was behind the driver's wheel. And then to his amazement, the squirrel said: "I just want you to know what it feels like!"

In our gospel narrative for today, Jesus gives us a parable that is an allegory. Each character in His story represented someone real.

The immediate meaning of this parable is simple: (1). The Landowner refers to God. (2) The vineyard represents the nation of Israel, (Most Jews were familiar with the passage from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 5) in which God planted a vineyard, which symbolized the country of Israel. (3). The wicked tenants represented the Jewish religious leaders, and the people. (4). The servant's sent by the owner of the vineyard, represents the Old Testament Prophets. (5). Of course, the owner's son represents God's Son, Jesus the Christ. The scripture tells us, (this is in John's Gospel). "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." (6). The new tenants to whom the owner gave the vineyard, represents the rest of us, the Church.

Now we tend to hear the parables of Jesus, from a human perspective, rather than from God's perspective. None of the parables had names in the original Greek Text. For example, most of us, have heard of the "Parable of the Prodigal Son", but when you look at from God's perspective, it really should be called the "Parable of the Forgiving Father." Remember a few weeks ago, I spoke on the parable of "The Laborers in the Vineyard", but from God's perspective, it should be called, "The parable of the Generous Boss."

When you look at our parable for today, it is called, "The Parable of the Wicked Tenants". But from God's perspective, it should be called, "The Parable of the Patient Landowner."

In this story, Jesus teaches us, five foundational truths about the character of God. And once we uncover these truths, then we will find a corresponding personal lesson that we can apply to our lives.

\*The First Truth is that God is the Owner. God is the Creator and He owns all of Planet Earth and beyond. The Psalmist of old proclaims: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it."

The tenants in the parable didn't own the vineyard; the owner placed them there expecting to receive some of the grapes harvested.

He didn't demand all of the grapes, just a portion of them at harvest time. But the tenants rejected the owner's request and acted as if they owned the vineyard.

The essence of sin, is declaring independence from your Creator, refusing to acknowledge God's ownership of this world and rejecting His claim on your life.

The essence of sin is saying, "I don't need God. I am the master of my own fate, the captain of my own soul."

But the truth is, you and I don't really own anything, we are to be managers of God's property. We are to be the steward's of God's creation.

When I was growing up in rural eastern North Carolina, there was a sharecropper, that lived just down the road from our house, his small house was on a tobacco farm, and I remember seeing this guy from time to time working for this farmer in the community.

Well as you know, a sharecropper is someone who lives on a farm, and farms the land, but doesn't own the land, the sharecropper works the land, plants the seeds, and brings in the harvest. In return for his or her hard-work, the sharecropper is allowed to keep some of the crop, that he or she produces, and the rest goes to the land-owner.

In a real sense, each of us is a sharecropper for the Lord. We don't own anything; we just manage a part of God's creation. So manage more than others.

But sometimes, we do the same thing these wicked tenants did, we start thinking we own the vineyard.

I wonder how our heavenly Father must feel, when we walk into the house and say; "Mine!" Or when we get behind the wheel of the car and say; "Mine!" Or when we go online and check our bank account and say; "Mine!"

No, Everything good that you have is a gift from God. Everything in this world is temporary, except for the Word of God, and your life in heaven with God.

\*The Second Truth is that God is Patient. The owner of the vineyard sent a messenger to collect what was due him, but the sharecroppers beat him up and kicked him out.

So, Instead of sending the police to arrest those wicked tenants, God (the owner) simply sent another servant, and they killed him; so the owner sent another servant and they stoned him to death, and so forth.

So what do we learn about God from this story? That God is patient with us. For instance, imagine that you are the landlord of an apartment complex, you send one of your employees to collect the monthly rent, and the renter beats up your employee and says; "This apartment is mine, and I am not paying you one dime!" That would not be a good feeling.

Maybe that is the way, God feels when we sometimes claim ownership of what is really His. Understand, this parable that Jesus told, is really about us, the human family and our behavior.

God has prepared a vineyard for us to manage. That great job you have, the life that you live, the people that surround you, the talents and abilities you possess, didn't come by chance, by accident, by a twist of fate, or by your good looks.

God put you and I on this earth. You and I are here for a reason. God is the creator, and He owns it all. God is not asking you and I to give Him 50% or even 80%, He wants 100%, and that is you.

He is asking you to first acknowledge His ownership, His Lordship over your life. He is reaching out to you in love, and He has sent you plenty of messengers along the way to help you.

Each day that you and I go about our daily business and our daily lives, do you see that God is reaching out to you, it could be a dozen times, or a hundred times, but each time He is still reaching out to you, do you even notice?

Back in September I had to do the memorial service for someone in our local community, and as people, who knew this person, were coming up to speak, I kept hearing a common thread of how everyone was taken by surprise at His death. Did you catch that? They were surprised by his death, yet death will come to us all.

What that tells me, and should tell us all, is that God is trying to get our attention by letting us know, that tomorrow is promised to no one, and that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Your life in this world is finite, you are given a certain amount of time in this world and that is it.

Because we get so consumed by the things of this world, no matter how great we think things are, it will return to dust, and in the end, faith in God is all that matters.

God is patient and long suffering, and He reaches out to you and to me, every day in this life in both the good things of life, in our joys and in our happiness, but that He is also reaching out to you and to me, in our times of sorrow and sadness in subtle ways, beckoning us to trust in Him, and to know that He is there for us and will never leave us or forsake us in both life and in death.

\*The Third Truth is that God is Love. In this parable, after the owner's servants had been rejected, abused, and some even killed. The owner of the vineyard takes an astonishing step. Instead of sending in a "strike-force" to kill the wicked tenants, He sends His only Son.

By sending His only Son, He hoped that the tenants would respect His Son, and instead they kill Him. But God knew, that this was to take place, this was no surprise to God.

This parable not only highlights the love of God, it also reveals the utter wickedness of the human heart.

The tenants of the vineyard didn't kill the owner's Son in the heat of anger, it certainly wasn't an act of "self-defense", no, it was a deliberate calculated decision.

The tenants thought that by killing the Son of the Vineyard owner, they could claim total ownership of the vineyard.

God sent His Son into this world, to bring us the love of God through faith in Him, so that we as wicked and sinful as we are, would respond to God's offer, and live.

All of us so should know this scripture passage by heart, it comes from John's Gospel, Luther himself said this is the gospel in a nutshell.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life." John, chapter 3, verse 16.

Can you comprehend that? There is only one God, and He has only one Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

God loves us, so much that He sent His only Son into this world to reconcile our differences with Him.

So did we do that? “No!” Did we run to meet God’s Son, and fall at His feet in surrender? “No!” We like the wicked tenants in the parable, caused the death of God’s Son, because of our sin.

That is what is so amazing about God’s love. Think about this: We are all sinners by nature, because we are all born into sin, and we are sinful by choice. But God still loves us, and will never give up on us.

The Apostle nailed it when he said: “For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7, verse 14 to 15).

\*The Fourth Truth is that God is Just. After telling this story, Jesus asked the religious leaders, what the owner of the vineyard should do?

They said in their righteous indignation, (this is in verse 41) “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.”

With that answer, they were pronouncing their own judgment. Within 40 years of Jesus death and resurrection, in 70 AD, that beautiful Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by General Titus’ Army, not one stone was left upon another. The Romans leveled the Temple and burned the city of Jerusalem to the ground and thousands of Jews were slaughtered by the Roman Army.

God is the owner, God is the Creator, God is patient, and God is love. God is slow to anger, and quick to forgive, His mercies endure forever, but none of those attributes cancel out the fact that God is a just God. That means He will hand out perfect justice in the end.

As Jesus finished speaking this parable, He asked the religious leaders (this is in verse 42). “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?’

Jesus was actually quoting from Psalm 118, verse 22. A cornerstone is laid first, and it determines the alignment of all the other stones, but a capstone is laid last. A capstone is often called a “keystone” like what you would see in an arch or arch-way.

\*The Fifth and final Truth is that God is Faithful. The scripture tells us that God is faithful and his faithfulness remains the same for all time. The writer of the Book of Hebrews tells us in chapter 13, verse 8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.”

When you hear this parable it sounds rather depressing. We know that we are just as wicked and corrupt as the tenants in the story.

The news doesn’t sound very good does it? But there is good news in this parable. Even though we are not always faithful, God is faithful, yesterday, today, tomorrow, and forever and ever Amen.

God is faithful toward us. God calls us to examine ourselves and our confession of faith. These must be judged according to His Holy Word, not our human understanding.

To clarify our understanding, we also see in the Lutheran Confessions, as a correct explanation of God's Word. Though we are unfaithful at times, when we repent and turn to Jesus Christ in faith, God forgives us.

The sacrifice has been paid, the debt has been paid for our wickedness, our sinfulness, by the death and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

God remains faithful to His vineyard, and He remains faithful to His people, you and I. God has planted in us the good soil of our baptism.

God has cared for us by watering us with His Word and the blessed-sacraments. God continues and will continue to send faithful workers that build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?"

This was the Lord's doing, so that we might be saved, and it is marvelous in our eyes. God is Creator, God is Patient, God is Love, God is Just and God is faithful to His Word, and empowered by His Holy Spirit, we bear the fruit of faith and fulfill God's expectations of us, as we trust in Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior, now and for always. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord God, Open our eyes to see that all good things come from You. Let us never forget that because of our sin, your Son had to die to pay the debt we could never pay and was resurrected, so that we may live in eternity with You. Help us to be ever mindful, that, when we fail to live as you would have us to live, to seek your forgiveness, repent of our sins and seek your ways. All these things we humbly pray, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.