

The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

5 October 2005

The Chapel of the Cross
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

Isaiah 5:1-7/Philippians 3:4b-14/Matthew 21:33-46/Psalm 80:7-14

Our Lord Jesus, you have endured the doubts and foolish questions of every generation. Forgive us for trying to be judge over you, and grant us the confident faith to acknowledge you as Lord. Amen.

Got Grapes?

Jesus, it seems, likes to talk about vineyards in his parables. Previous to today's Gospel text, Jesus has spoken two other parables involving vineyards, their owners, and those who work there. In the first, the vineyard owner hires workers at odd times throughout the day but still pays them all the same wage at the end of the day [Matthew 20:1-16], and in the second, one of the owner's sons works in the vineyard while the other refuses to do so [Matthew 21:28-32]. In this third of Jesus' vineyard parables recounted in Matthew, the owner rents the vineyard to tenants who **clearly** would rather commit murder than to give the owner the harvested produce due to him. Given a second, and even a third chance to make good on the terms of the lease agreement, the tenants instead leave a trail of beaten, dead bodies – including the body of the owner's own son. And now, with the heir to the vineyard dead, the tenants hope to take possession of the vineyard for themselves outright – so far, certainly not a parable for the timid.

Now, Jesus says, “when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” Well, everybody listening knew the inevitable consequences of such murderous behavior, and so they respond without hesitation: “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.” At which time, instead of saying, “That's right!” Jesus responds, “Haven't you read the scriptures?” Then he quotes Psalm 118: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes.” And Jesus concludes by saying, this means that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.”

Enigmatic words on the part of Jesus, aren't they? Talk of vineyards and murderous behavior by tenants has been replaced **in an instant** by talk of cornerstones and the kingdom of God.

Suddenly Jesus switches from parable to prophecy, from agriculture to architecture, and from talk of brutal murders and terrible deaths to the promise of new life. The

very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. This is the Lord's doing, and God's action clearly contradicts all human cunning and human planning. It is marvelous, an unexpected and undeserved eruption of life in the midst of death.¹

And so, as Jesus sharpens the focus of the parable, some of his listeners start to become nervous. Indeed, Matthew tells us that the chief priests and Pharisees realize at this point that Jesus is not simply telling another one of his "teaching stories," but rather that he is shining the spotlight on them. And, although the death and resurrection of Jesus are in the background of the parable and the prophecy, the foreground is taken up with the drama of privileges taken away from one group and given to another. The kingdom of God, Jesus warns, will be taken away from you and given to new tenants – tenants that produce the fruits of that kingdom. Matthew pictures Jesus speaking with outrage in this parable to priests, elders, and Pharisees about their death-dealing use of religious authority and leadership – not accusations to be taken lightly.

But **why** does Matthew picture Jesus speaking so harshly to the religious leadership? **Couldn't he, shouldn't he** have stopped with the lovely promise from Psalm 118 about the Lord's doing that brings new life out of death? Some commentators suggest that Matthew recounts Jesus' harsh words in order to criticize the Jewish leaders of his own time, using Jesus' words to substantiate his own frustrations with them. But, as Bob Smith points out in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew,

it is far more likely that Matthew is really addressing not Jews but Christians, especially Christian leaders. They feel secure as members of the new community that has inherited the kingdom. And they pride themselves on being teachers and guides in that community. Matthew thinks they need stern warning.²

So ... Matthew is most likely speaking to **Christian** leaders – those whose vocation it is to work in God's vineyard – those whose vocation it is to nurture the bearing of the kingdom's fruit. Jesus' words of judgment are intended, by Matthew, as a warning for **Christian** leaders – and so perhaps as a warning for you and for me – and for all who exercise leadership and authority in the Christian community. Matthew uses narratives about Jesus' own conflicts with Jewish religious authorities in order to push contemporary Christian leaders toward critical reflection and self-examination. Apparently, it is not enough to hold membership in the correct church body or community of faith.

¹ Robert H. Smith, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989, 254.

² *ibid.*

Nor does it suffice, apparently, to be counted as a recognized leader or teacher in these communities of faith. In fact, Jesus seems to be saying that God scrutinizes leaders with particular care.

I must admit that I don't like hearing these stern words and warnings of Jesus directed toward me. Like the Pharisees in our text, I get nervous – even **angry**. I don't like to be pushed toward critical reflection and self-examination when it comes to **my vocation** and how I exercise it. After all, I've responded to God's call to leadership in the Christian community faithfully – what **else** does God want from me? I'm doing the best I can, and now Jesus has the audacity to suggest that it's not enough, or that it's not up to snuff somehow? That God's kingdom can be taken away from me, and given to others? So, I have to ask again, **what is the purpose** of Jesus' stern words and his ominous warning about kingdom privileges that can be taken away?

I think the purpose, although I may not like it very much, is to serve as a much needed “reality check” for my life and work in God's vineyard. As one of my professors at PLTS, Bob Goeser, used to say – the purpose of the proclamation of the Law – that is, the purpose of words of divine judgment, wrath, and warning – is **not to scare us to death**, but rather to **expose to us** our own persistent tendencies to want to dress ourselves up as “false saints.” Jesus' words serve as a warning to me and to all those in religious leadership to beware of this **most insidious temptation** – the temptation to feel comfortable with being a part of the theologically, ethically, and politically correct or elite – the temptation to feel secure in our educations, pious pedigrees, and holy lifestyles – that **ever present temptation** to think that God is, or can be, impressed with these sorts of things. And so, strong words of divine judgment like those in our text, I think are never spoken merely for the purpose of condemnation. Rather, they are spoken for the purpose of **exposing our pretenses to false sainthood** – pretenses to which we cling in the hope of being seen by God, and by others, as good, and righteous, and without blame. And even more distressing than this, the Law's exposure of our false sainthood, its exposure of all our pretenses to self-righteousness means, in fact, that this false self will have to die for the sake of bearing fruit, real fruit in God's kingdom. It's not easy to look at this side of ourselves. And the death of these false selves is not easy to accept and it is not easy to live out. Indeed, we cannot kill this false self, this Old Adam, by ourselves. In the waters of our baptism, the old Adam is drowned and the new Adam is raised to life, but this dying and rising takes a lifetime for God to accomplish in us. Here I am reminded of the observation Karl Barth once made, that even though the old Adam has been drowned in the waters of baptism, the problem of the human condition is that apparently that Old Adam still knows how to swim.

This exposing of false sainthood, this death struggle with the old Adam, I think, is just what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Philippians. He is testifying to his own “reality check,” to his own temptations to false religiosity and sainthood, and to his own death-struggle with the Old Adam. Paul insists that although in the eyes of the world, he was the cream of the religious crop, in the kingdom of God all that pedigree doesn’t matter a bit. Indeed, Paul calls it what it is – rubbish. False sainthood is rubbish, Paul says, because it forever scrambles to achieve a “all rightness” with God based on being good enough, rather than receiving “all rightness” with God – an “all rightness” that, Paul says, comes from God and is based on faith in Christ and the power of his resurrection.

OK, so we all have to struggle against our tendencies toward dressing ourselves up as false saints – **is this the point** of Jesus’ parable and Paul’s letter? Certainly, the persistent temptation to find our security in false sainthood – what Luther understands as the heart of human sinfulness – is most troublesome indeed. But **why is it so troublesome?** Because, as Jesus parable illustrates, false saints make for murderous tenants in God’s vineyard. Because false saints can’t be used to produce the fruits of God’s kingdom. But being used by God to produce the fruits of the kingdom **is precisely the point** of Jesus’ parable and Paul’s letter to the Philippians. You see, being made aware of our tendencies to dress up as false saints is not an end in itself. Being brought face to face with our inability to make our own fruit good enough is not meant to lead us into despair and just leave us there. Rather, such awareness **is that which compels us to recognize our need for God.** Seeing our false self for what it is **empties us of our own self-importance** so that we can be filled by the righteousness, the “all rightness” from God based on faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and raised for our sake. Only by relying upon the righteousness that comes from God and not in our own false saintliness, can we become what God desires us to be – those who produce fruit in God’s kingdom. In this kingdom, it is the stone that the builders reject that is used as the cornerstone – and not the stone that looks “just perfect.” In this kingdom, producing fruit means having our hearts set on being used by God to accomplish His will for the world – and does not mean having our hearts consumed with personal recognition. Leadership in this kingdom means traveling the way of Jesus, the way of faith in God’s goodness – and not in paving our own way to safety. All this we can do, because of who God is and what God has done – not because of who we are and what we have done. All this we can do because God in Christ Jesus has already reconciled the world to himself and for this reason entrusts us with ministries of reconciliation – **ministries that can bear the kingdom’s own fruit.**

God in Christ Jesus, through the power of the Spirit promises us everything we need to produce the fruits of this kingdom – **in water, Word, bread, and wine** – God’s own gifts that we hear, touch, and taste today. These are precious gifts through which our Lord Jesus **gives us his very self**, and thereby strengthens us in faith toward him, and in fervent love toward one another. Water, Word, bread, and wine – these are God’s own gifts for us, through which our Lord Jesus continually teaches us to give ourselves away and to work, as Luther said, “with might and main for our neighbor.” That is what life in God’s vineyard is all about. That is the fruit God desires. Amen.