

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church

Shobonier, Illinois

Lent 5C

April 3, 2022

Luke 20:9-20

What Will the Vineyard Owner Do?

And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. . . . 13 Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.'" (Luke 20:9, 13 ESV)

In the Name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world.

It's Holy Week. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, cleansed the temple, and is now teaching there. He was questioned by "the chief priests and the scribes with the elders" who asked Him by what authority He had done such things. When they wouldn't answer Jesus' question, He didn't answer theirs. Then He addresses the people who were there, but the leaders were listening in. And if they listened closely, they would hear Jesus answer their question. By God's grace and wisdom, we get to listen in too. But will we hear and understand what He says?

Jesus starts with a parable about a man planting a vineyard, leasing it out to tenants, and leaving for a long while. Now, those listening to Jesus would recall that the Old Testament often spoke of the people of Israel as God's vineyard, especially in terms of judgement. They would have thought, for example, of Isaiah 5:1-7:

"Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice

vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

“And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

“And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

“For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!”

This is the imagery that Jesus is building on. The vineyard is Israel. It belongs to the Lord God. He has done everything necessary for the vineyard that it should produce good grapes. But it doesn't. And so the Lord's judgment will fall on that vineyard, and it will be destroyed, which is what happened, historically. Jerusalem and Judah fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The temple was destroyed, the people taken into exile.

Thus, Jesus' parable was a prophecy of rebuke and judgment. He summarizes hundreds of years of this rebellious history in just a few sentences: “When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out.”

Indeed, God had sent His prophets time after time over the centuries to call Israel to repentance, to call them to faithfulness. But time after time, Israel mistreated them, beating them and treating them shamefully. The prophets came looking for good fruit, but the people of Israel sent them away empty-handed. This happened time and time again. Moses, they grumbled against and disobeyed. Other prophets, like Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah, likewise were not listened to. The kings and the priests and the false prophets despised them and rejected them and persecuted them. Jesus' story reflects the historical record.

Now, this all seems so unlikely. After all, you would think that after the tenants abuse even the first of his servants, let alone two or three, that the owner of the vineyard would send in the troops and have the wicked tenants arrested or killed and take the vineyard away from them. But this just shows the patience and the longsuffering of God, that He does not strike us all down right away, even though we rebellious sinners deserve it.

What happens next is even more unreal. “Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’” What was he thinking? After the brutal treatment that his servants received, he now sends in his son! Who would do that? While that certainly would not happen in real life, Jesus uses it to illustrate His point. God now is sending His own Son--namely, Jesus Himself--to the vineyard, to Israel, and we have seen what kind of a reception He’s been getting. The leaders of Israel have rejected Him. They hate Him. Even now, as Jesus is telling this parable, the tension is mounting, the conflict is escalating, and Jesus’ enemies are conspiring against Him.

And Jesus knows what they’re thinking. He speaks what is in their minds: “But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.’” The scribes and the chief priests wanted to get Jesus out of the way, because He was ruining their prestige and their position and their power among the people. Jesus was exposing their hypocrisy and their selfish pride. Get Jesus out of the way, they thought, and we can go back to business as normal. So they wanted to kill Him.

Which is what would happen just a couple of days later. “And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.” On Good Friday, the leaders of Israel handed Jesus over to the governor, Pontius Pilate. They demanded His crucifixion, and He was killed. Jesus knew what they were planning and plotting to do.

But once the tenants have done this to the owner’s son, “What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” And that, too, is what ended up happening. Forty years later, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and now had added to it killing God’s Son--in A.D. 70 the Romans came and destroyed Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, never again to be rebuilt.

Upon hearing this judgement, the people said, "Surely not!" Whether they were thinking of the death of the son, the destruction of the tenants, or the giving of the vineyard to others, isn't clear. It could perhaps be any or all of those. After all, the judgement is hard to hear.

For this is a parable of judgment on unbelieving Jerusalem, and especially her leaders, who rejected her Messiah, God's own Son, Jesus Christ. And the vineyard was turned over to others. God's people on earth would no longer be the nation of Israel, the Jews, but would become the church of the New Testament, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, of all those who trust in Christ their Savior.

So, you and I, we who trust in Christ, that is, the church, we are God's vineyard now. What will we do when God sends His servants to us? He sends His preachers, His messengers, calling us back to God, calling us to repent of our sins, calling us to faithfulness and fruitfulness as God's people. Will we listen humbly and heed God's word? Or will we resist and rebel and not listen to what God is telling us? Will we abuse the preacher He sends us? The parable of the tenants—including its outcome, the judgment that fell on Jerusalem—serves as a permanent warning to us to not let the word of God go in one ear and out the other, to not harden our hearts but rather to humbly receive God's word as it is preached and brought to us.

And really, when you know you're a sinner and you have no righteousness in yourself, why in the world would you want to resist that Word? For this is good news that God's messengers bring to you. It is the Word of a God who is indeed patient and longsuffering with you. He has not struck you down as you deserve, for all your rebelliousness. Instead, He sent His own Son, His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, precisely into the buzzsaw of hostility and rejection and death, to suffer and die for you. Jesus took the judgment you and I deserve. He died, so that we might live. God's own Son won your forgiveness by shedding His holy blood on the cross for you. His resurrection guarantees your own resurrection and eternal life, since you have been joined to Jesus through baptism and faith, the gift of God.

Yes, dear friends, we are those "others" in the story, the ones now privileged and graced to take care of God's vineyard. And by God's grace, and because of Christ, what then will the owner of the vineyard do to us? He will give us everything necessary to make us fruitful as His people, as He does in Word and Sacrament. He will bless our vineyard, for it is His vineyard, His

church. He will keep us faithful, and keep calling us back to Himself, by sending us His servants to bring us His Word. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will forgive our sins. He will keep us in the one true faith. He will graciously give us the inheritance of His Son: resurrection and eternal life. God will raise our bodies on the last day. And He will give us life together and forever with Christ and with all of God's people. Take hold of this promise, beloved, for this is what the owner of the vineyard will do! To Him be the glory now and forever. Amen.

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

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener