

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)
St. Matthew 21:33-43

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Those hired vinedressers, the tenants, were foolish and blind. Anyone reading or hearing the parable could tell that. Even the chief priests and elders of the people knew it.

In the parable, a landowner planted a vineyard, dug a winepress in it, and built a tower. He leased it to the vinedressers then went off into another country. The lease isn't too difficult to understand—the rules are easy to figure out here. It's the owner's vineyard, winepress, and tower. The tenants are hired. They were to tend to the property, care for the vineyard, harvest the grapes, and give the owner what is his. In return, they got to live on the land and keep some of the harvest.

But that's not the way it goes in Jesus' parable.

When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.

The hired vinedressers refused to honor the terms of the lease. In fact, they were so brazen as to kill the servants that the owner sent to collect what was his—twice! It is clear that they wanted the land and all that belonged to the owner, and they were willing to kill for it. The owner still needed to collect, and he was willing to let the tenants remain in their lease, so he sent his son. "They will respect my son," he said.

Foolishly, they killed him, too. "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance."

It's the kind of parable that makes you shake your head in disbelief. The owner is gracious and merciful in allowing the tenants to remain in the lease, even after killing his servants, sending his son only to get what is his according to the terms of the lease. The tenants could have had what they wanted (well, a lot of it, anyway), but they kill the son, instead. How foolish and blind they are!

"When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

"He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."

It seems unconscionable that people would be foolish enough to kill a son and expect to keep the owner's property. In no time and at no place does that logic ever play out; therefore, no one should be foolish enough to hold to it.

But that is exactly what happened.

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 marvelous in our eyes"? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.

"When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them." (Matthew 21:45)

They were the same people—of the same people—that God had placed into His promised land, often referred to in the Old Testament as His vineyard. To them, God sent prophet after prophet. These prophets proclaimed to them the Word of God. They came to demand the fruits of God's vineyard—repentance, faith, trust in His promises—reminding them of their sin, and pointing them to

the promise of redemption in the Seed of the woman. Hear that again, dear people—the prophets pointed God’s people to the promised Son of God that He would send to them!

Time and again, the people rejected the prophets’ words, beating them, stoning them, and killing them. God would send some prophets, they would be rejected, and God would send more, and they would be rejected. Graciously and mercifully, God was patient with His people, sending prophets to call them to repentance and reminding them of the promised redemption in His Son, hoping, you could say, that they would turn from their wicked ways and return to Him. (cf. 2 Chronicles 7:14; Hosea 6:1ff)

But the warning was ever present:

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! (Isaiah 5:4-7)

God kept His promise. “I will send my Son to them; they will respect my Son.” “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” (Galatians 4:4-5) In a stable outside of Bethlehem, the virgin Mary gave birth to a Son whom they would call Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. True to form, seeing Him as the heir, as it were, they did not respect Him.

It was a short four days after telling this parable that Jesus would be captured by the temple guards. A day after that, the chief priests and elders of the people would be sneering at Him as He hung dying on the cross. They took Him, cast Him out of the vineyard, and killed Him—Jesus was bound by the chief priests and elders of the people, led outside of Jerusalem, and crucified on a hill called Skull. “This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.”

And it’s a good thing they did, too. Jesus came, not merely as another prophet, but as the Son of God and Son of Man, to give His life as a ransom for many. And so, He willingly went to Skull to shed His blood as a propitiation for the sins of the world—for the people of Israel who heard the prophets and those who killed them, for the chief priests and elders of the people who rejected the Chief Cornerstone, for those who now do not confess Him, and for you, dear Baptized, who confess and trust in Him for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Jesus came as the Son—as a servant—not to punish, but to receive the punishment for the sins of the world and to save.

And the ironic thing in all of this is that in His death, Jesus *gives* you the inheritance. Jesus came “to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” In His death in your place and your baptism into His death and resurrection, Jesus gives you the adoption as sons, making you coheirs with Him of the glory that is His, now ascended to the right hand of Majesty. You are baptized, and so you have been placed in God’s vineyard, the hedge built around it and you, and He your tower to watch over you and protect you. “This is the LORD’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”

However, this parable demonstrates the blindness and foolishness of sin. It led the Pharisees, chief priests, and elders of the people to believe that God would approve of their rejection of the Son and let them keep the inheritance. Never mind their rejection of the terms of the lease—their rejection of the rules.

As I said before, such an attitude seems unconscionable. It's irrational, blind, and foolish. And the same irrational, blind foolishness infects you as well. You are also tempted to deny and reject the rules or the Son. And it must be said that if you reject one, it will lead to the rejection of both.

For instance, you claim to be a Christian, but reject the Law of God. Dear hearers, this is more than merely sinning—having transgressed and rejected the Law of God like you *normally* do—then repenting of it and receiving forgiveness. No, I am speaking of an outright rejection of the Law of God. It manifests itself in you in the form of pet sins that are just too attractive to you or too precious, not the kind of pet sin that you “simply” struggle with, but the kind that you do not want to let go of. It manifests itself in a congregation or church body in their struggle to “fit in” in society, and so they end up embracing or overlooking a sin or sins in an effort to attract more people to their services and programs—so they refuse to call a sin a sin.

The inevitable conclusion of rejecting the Law of God is to reject the Gospel. After all, if the Law proclaims to you your sinfulness, and the Law is not proclaimed to you, then you will recognize no need for forgiveness. If you are not told of your sins, you will see no need for a Savior. If you can be Christian and cling to your pet sin, then what's to say that you need to kill and repent of any sin in you? You come to the conclusion that you are doing pretty good, so you don't need the Son, you have no need of Jesus and the salvation He freely gives. Likewise, those congregations and churches which overlook a particularly popular sin; if they do not condemn this sin for the sin that it is, as the Word of God directs, what's to say that they wouldn't then not condemn any sin? The conclusion is made by the people in those churches that they are doing pretty good, so they don't need the Son, and they have no need of the Jesus who died to give them salvation—they want a Jesus who pats them on the back.

In both cases, Jesus and His forgiveness is rejected. Yet somehow, the “Christian” with the pet sin or sins believes that they please God with their efforts. Somehow, the church which refuses to condemn sin still claims an inheritance with Jesus. However, if Jesus is rejected, then there is no salvation and no inheritance. These, as Jesus says in the parable, will have the kingdom taken away from them and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. The threat to them is not so much in their rejection of the Law of God, but that the rejection of the Law leads to the rejection of Jesus, the Son and His death on the cross for the forgiveness of sins.

Sometimes, however, it's the rejection of the Son which comes first. The rules are fine, but this Jesus fellow isn't necessary. However, if you are going to reject the Son out-of-hand, then you reject the Scriptures which declare who He is and why He came. You call them false. And if you call them false, then you also end up rejecting the Law of God which the Scriptures also proclaim.

In both cases—rejecting the Law or the Gospel—you end up being lost in your sins, and you condemn yourself.

Still, the Law of God is proclaimed in all of its harshness. You have sinned—transgressed the commandments of God—and for it, you deserve to die. Consequently, you reject and kill those whom God sends to you to call you to repentance, especially if it hits a little too close to home—if you've perceived that I am speaking about you.

And the Gospel is proclaimed in all of its sweetness. At just the right time, God sent His Son born of a woman, born under the same Law that you find yourselves under, despite rejecting it, that He would take your sins into His flesh and die for them in your place on the cross. Jesus has come, Jesus has died, and Jesus has risen again. You are baptized into His death and resurrection—you are placed into the vineyard—you have been given the kingdom of God. Now, ascended to the right hand of Majesty, He intercedes on your behalf and continues to send spokesmen to you to declare to you the graveness of your sin, and proclaim to you the full pardon that is yours in the blood of Jesus. By His death, you are made right with God—He has taken your sin from you—you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.