

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

Matthew 21:33-46

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Analysis by Mark Marius

33Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' 39So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41They said to him, "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."

42Jesus said to them, "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'?

43Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

45When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

DIAGNOSIS: Tenants Gone Bad

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Watchtower and Fences*

God has planted a vineyard, no doubt about it. And what a vineyard it is! It is the envy of all vineyards. It's fenced in, to keep out unwanted visitors or predators. It has a custom-built wine press. This vineyard is serious about making wine. Now, who wants to occupy this vineyard? Hmmm. Inside the fence in the wonderful vineyard or outside the fence is who knows what? Let's see, where do you think the baptized would be? Insiders, of course. Now what about this fence and watchtower. How did God construct these? Through God's law. God's law serves as our protection. What more do we need? Let the vineyard be fruitful. But instead of making wine for God we make whine. When others come looking for our produce we bask in our protection. Who says we have to share? We have the law on our side and you don't. So we throw the law at those slaves God sends to us. And of course the law convicts and kills. But that is no concern of ours because we are already inside. We have been given tenancy and we aren't about to budge or listen to anyone. We, who occupy the vineyard take that fence seriously and judge everyone who tries to enter-even those who have been sent by God himself to

collect the produce he expects are rejected as we throw the law at them. And the law beats them up, stones them, kills them and keeps them from collecting what the owner has planted. Do we show remorse? No relief that we are inside the fence. And since God rented this land to us we have squatters' rights.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Keep Out!*

The problem with tenancy is that it is hard to get us to budge once we take possession of the property. We may not own the vineyard but we sure do act like it. Even the owner's son is incapable of convincing us that God wants to reap what his land is capable of producing. But we are incapable of hearing the law in any way but our own, so there will be blood. Instead of sharing the fruit in our possession we keep it to ourselves. What choice do tenants have. Once we've harmed the slaves of the owner, we tenants can't but help but live a life of crime. It's kill or be killed. We can't afford to be evicted. We trust the fence, not the One who erected it. We even try to fortify it by formulating new doctrine. And by killing the Son we will ensure we can occupy this land forever. The land will be ours for good.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Defenseless*

But with all this bloodshed, God has no choice but to return to his vineyard and clean house. We have misused his land and misinterpreted his fence. We used God's fences selfishly, to protect ourselves and not the fruit of the vineyard. If God is the one who gave us an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth than we are as good as dead for the murders already committed. (See Luther's explanation of the Fifth Commandment in the Small Catechism for all the ways we break this on a daily basis.) For all the slaves we've killed, but especially for his Son. There will be hell to pay, and the wicked tenants will pay for it with a miserable death. We all fear this. The very fence given to protect us will now keep us from enjoying the vineyard.

PROGNOSIS: A New Lease on Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Fenceless*

God does come back to his vineyard looking for his Son's body. And he finds it buried in the ground. But instead of evicting the tenants or destroying the vineyard he is more interested in the death and life of his Son. It was on a rejected rock, Golgotha, that all the wicked tenants of every generation kill God's rightful heir. We tried to throw the law at him, but Jesus defeats it through his innocent death. So God resurrects his rejected son, which, not only becomes a building block but a wrecking ball (v. 44). And while we, the wicked tenants may fear that wrecking ball is swinging toward us to crush us, it is not. Instead of being used against us it is used for us. The wrecking ball smashes the fence and tears down the tower. Through Christ's death and resurrection the law we have abused is no longer to be found in fences and towers. The law has been accomplished in this Son, so it takes on a whole new life. This rejected stone opens for us a whole new world. A world built on trusting the owner and not the fence. And God saw to it that Jesus became our protection and gives us freedom to live unfettered in God's vineyard.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Keep in*

This changes us. We no longer need to squat. We no longer need to fear eviction. With no fences to maintain or fortify we can focus on the fruit of the vineyard. Our baptism reminds us that the Holy Spirit is at work in us. We operate out of a law written on our hearts by God's love for us. In a complete role reversal, God becomes a tenant in us and God isn't budging. Through the work of the Holy Spirit we are being moved to produce wonderful fruit. And we produce a wine with a full rich bouquet. Guided by the Spirit we become all about the wine (and bread) and less about the whine. Actually it is Christ's body and blood that we are about, as it is given for us, shed for us,

and becomes our rock of strength.

Step 6: Final Prognosis: (External Solution) : *Tear Down These Walls!*

And so, internally fortified, we are secure to give the produce away to all whom the owner asks us to. To fellow slaves, but no longer slaves, now siblings. To neighbors near and far. To wine critics and teetotalers. There is no longer any condemnation to face. We are bold to take risks for those who are at risk. We reach out to those who still experience the confinement of fences and walls. We use the rock of Christ to tear down those walls and break the chains that bind the hopeless and despairing. Prisons, hospitals, homeless shelters, the streets, are all in need of the body and blood of Christ. We share fruit, we share resources, we share the law of God's love-the Gospel, as we welcome these others into God's vineyard, God's kingdom.