

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

FRUITS OF THE KINGDOM

Matthew 21:33-46

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

33 "Listen 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. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 They 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." 42 Jesus 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'? 43 Therefore 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. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." 45 When the chief priests

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

DIAGNOSIS: Rotten

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Really Rotten*

The actions of the tenants are really rotten. A wonderful vineyard is planted (an interconnected community of people). The harvest comes (a time of accounting). And yet, when the landowner (God) sends his servants (the prophets) to collect his produce (love of God and neighbor), the tenants beat some and kill others. Ultimately, God sends the son (Jesus), but they throw him out of the vineyard and kill him. Originally, this parable was addressed to the “temple guard,” the chief priests and elders, who were themselves both (a) the chief “tenants” of God’s land through their stewardship of the temple and (b) notable “landowners” who took advantage of their Roman alliance, personal wealth and interpretation of the tax codes to foreclose on the farms of debt-ridden peasants, and feather their own nests. But, since God owns all and we all are tenants, we cannot limit this story to first-century Palestine. It applies equally to anyone of any time. God holds us all accountable for either the rotten or productive way we treat God, each other, and God’s agents. It’s written in the code, the Law.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Dangerously Detached*

Really rotten grapes are dangerously detached from their life-giving stem. The rotten tenants are detached from their duty to the poor (the true intent of the law), respect for the son (the true call of the gospel), and from the owner (God) who gives the law and sends the son. By their uneasy patron/client partnership

with the Romans, and by their own actions against deadbeat debtors, the “temple guard” should know darn well how dangerous this is and what the owner (God) will do when he comes. For chief priests danced a delicate two-step between two superpowers every day-God and the Romans. We also dance a lot of two-steps with higher powers. And God, of course, is the biggest power of them all.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Eternally Doomed*

Detached from the stem, rotten grapes are doomed eternally. Walk through the vineyards of Napa Valley any time from midsummer to early fall and you will be trampling on rotten grapes. There is no use for them, except to drop them to the ground and let them rot and decay back into the dirt from which they came. The chief priests (who are simultaneously “chief tenants” and “chief owners”) pronounce their own death sentence according to their expert understanding of both Mosaic and Roman law: “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.” Bingo! A miserable death is the final outcome (inheritance) for those who insist on being detached from God and God’s ultimate agent, God’s beloved son (Jesus). Just ask the experts. Jesus did.

PROGNOSIS: Fruitful

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Eternally Saved*

Amazingly, however, there is a great reversal. “The stone that the builders (temple authorities) rejected has become the cornerstone [of a new temple]”-the Church. The miserable death of Jesus does not result in an eternal foreclosure, but rather opens up a forgiveness of debts (all sins, including our economic neglect of the poor) and a new way of life apart from and superior to the old temple system. And this happens simply because God wills it so. “This is the Lord’s doing, and it is

amazing in our eyes.” Much to their amusement and delight, Psalm 118:22-23 was a rib-tickling, inside joke to early Jewish Christians. For they knew the crucifixion of Jesus took place just outside the city gate on a knob of rock that was too crummy to be used for the temple like the rest of the stone in that same quarry. And so the “rock-rejected” (Calvary itself) bore witness to the humbled and exalted Rock, the Cornerstone, Jesus Christ. But, of course, their greater joy was in their wide-eyed “WOW!” at what God had worked in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Surprisingly, some of the best vines grow on crummy rock...that is, on the Crucified One.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Powerfully Engrafted

Those who hear this message of good news and believe it are engrafted into a new planting of God, the Church. Interestingly, the stone-building-brick language of this passage doesn't last long in the New Testament (see 1 Corinthians 12 & John 15). It is too fixed and rigid. Rather, the masonry metaphor yields to “body” and “vine” language which is more lively, vibrant, organic and dynamic. God never did want to live in a house of stone (as in the temple in Jerusalem or in the two tablets of stone of the Ten Commandments). Rather, God tabernacles in the Christ and in the living temple (bodies, words, actions) of Christ-trusting people (John 1-2).

Just as in Napa Valley, all the different varieties are grafted into the same one disease-resistant root stock, so also all who are receptive to being pruned and re-planted by the gospel, are grafted by baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This includes non-Jewish, gentile people too (other tenants), who were once excluded from the vineyard or at least from its inner circle. One of the messages of Jesus to the peasant apostles of Galilee was, “You are not fixed to the land!” Their life was dependent on a person (God's Son) not a

place. And so, they could be mobile...and preach a mobile message. Too much attachment to a place turns "place" into a "prison" with walls and watchtowers keeping some in and others out. It is much better to be attached to a vital and vinous mission and ministry. This is a good reminder to Christians of today who get too caught up in buildings and not the mission field outside their door.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Fruitfully Productive*

Those engrafted into the disease-resistant rootstock of God's Son by baptism produce the fruits of the kingdom in all their wild and amazing variety. That fruit is (a) the social sensitivity, justice and mercy proclaimed so well by the prophets (Micah, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea-to name but just a few), (b) the cruciformed love, debt-forgiveness and servanthood proclaimed and modeled by Christ himself, and (c) the gifts of the Spirit enumerated by Paul. Oh sure, those who bear the good fruit of the kingdom die, too, one day. But, their death is not a "miserable" one. Rather, like the good grapes from the harvest they are pressed, strained, filtered, fermented and clarified through Christ's own death and resurrection into the amazing wine of God's new heaven and new earth (THE INHERITANCE!). A vivid demonstration of this is given not only at harvest time in Napa Valley, but also in the bread and wine broken and poured each Sabbath in local gatherings. And what else can we say except, "Wow! This is the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes."