

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

THE PROPHETS vs. "PROFITS" IN THE VINEYARD

Matthew 21:33-46

Pentecost 21/Lectioary 27

Analysis by Norb E. Kabelitz

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, 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.

Note: Isaiah 5 says the vineyard is the “house of Israel.” While this text (v. 45) from Matthew has been used to blame the priests and Pharisees for their abuse of authority or leadership (Acts 7:51-53), thus opening the kingdom to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46-47), the mission to the Gentiles had its roots long ago in the prophets (Acts 15:13-18). Matthew says only, “given to a people that produces the fruit of the kingdom” (v. 43). “It is far more likely that Matthew is especially addressing not Jews but Christian leaders—who feel “secure” as members who have now inherited the kingdom” (see Robert H. Smith. Matthew, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, p. 255). See also Jaroslav Vajda’s hymnic text (Lutheran Book of Worship #378) which says, “a vineyard grows with promise green.” For further study see The Parables of Judgment by Robert Farrar Capon, pp. 112-117, Eerdmans 1990.

DIAGNOSIS: The “Profits” of Unbelief and Arrogance

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Using “Religion” for Private Gain*

The Wittenburg Door (“Spirited Satire since 1517”) has for many years exposed various and sundry media “evangelists” and leaders of mega-churches who use a gospel of “material overflowing life” in the name of Jesus to enrich followers and themselves. The religious enterprise gets treated as a business controlled by a charismatic leader and a “theology of glory.” The tenants (leaders) assume ownership and pocket the fruits of the

religious enterprise. This diagnosis is not limited to “them” but may well include independents and mainline who preach a gospel of success and “survival.” If the shoe fits, wear it!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *An absent faith and absent Landlord*

While the name of God is acknowledged (“Lord, Lord,” Matt.7:21-22), God is treated as an absentee landlord in the religious/political arena. The tenants (priests and Pharisees, or we as contemporary leaders) use God’s “planting” as something they/we administer as personal property. Don’t we say “our” church? When the owner sends his slaves to proclaim and protect God’s interests (think, for instance, of the prophetic work of Martin Luther King, author of “Letters from Prison,” or his namesake—the prophetic Martin Luther), church leadership abuses and kills them because they threaten the numbers, success, and values invested in “our” administration of the Kingdom. And, while crucifixion was thought to end the son’s inheritance, God uses the Cross to produce God’s kind of fruit (an idea we have come to identify as a theology of the cross: of “faith, not sight; of hope, not consummation; of love, not power”; see The Lutheran, “Theology of the Cross for Our Day,” by Douglas John Hall, March 2004).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Accountability and Judgment*

In modern parlance, we are the “tenants,” accountable for preaching “Christ and him crucified” and under the inspiration of the Spirit produce the fruits of “faith, hope and love.” But the “fruits” have been embezzled by leaders who preach a prosperity gospel that uses Jesus as a mere “teacher” of ‘positives’ that downplay or ignore the significance, the judgment, and saving effect of the Cross. Damn you for being faithless to My Son and arrogant in your selfish interests (see Acts 8:18-22)! So this is not merely a historical Judean vs.

Gentile “trade,” but a contemporary judgment against any use of “religion” or the Gospel as a mechanism for sectarian control or private gain!

PROGNOSIS: The “Prophets” of Faith

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Prophetic Word fulfilled in Jesus*

Unbelief sees Jesus merely as a martyr and teacher, not as the Messiah whose sacrifice gives us a new lease on life with God. Look at the witness of Acts (3:17) for the latter: “And now, brethren I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled! Repent therefore, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord’s doing and it is amazing!” The word of the prophets is fulfilled in Jesus and the disciple-tree will bear God’s kind of fruit grounded in his passion, death, and resurrection!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The obedience of faith*

We preach Christ and him crucified! Faith sees Jesus the Crucified as the One who is the Prince of Life! “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” of a living temple of God, followers who will “bear fruit!” Jesus’ prayer affirms a cruciform proclamation of good news: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!” While human judgment suggests the miserable death of those who would “kill the Son,” we hear God saying through Joseph, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people” (Gen. 50:20). Repent and believe this Gospel!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Fruit that Glorifies God*

The world will see your love for the Lord because of his mercy and “see the good you do and say and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Paul will refer to the first converts in Achaia as the “first fruit of Achaia.” It would seem that “fruits” are a) converts of unbelievers to the Crossed Messiah (1 Cor. 16:15); and b) Gospel deeds of faith and hope and love: “Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others” (2 Cor. 9:13), “so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10). Good works do not make a Christian, but a Christian does good works. Good things follow good faith!