

Oct. 4, 2020 Pentecost 18A
Matthew 21:33-46
Where's the Fruit?

Good morning, church. We wrapped up our week of being—a week of being with Jesus. We looked at the importance of being with Jesus in His Word, in prayer, in worship, in solitude, in sacrifice (fasting) and in fellowship (just having fun with other people). We learned the relationship between our being and our doing and saw that

our doing flows from who we are and who we are becoming as we spend time with Jesus.

I would love to hear how your week went. Where were the joys and challenges in the Red Letter Challenge this week? Where did you see God acting?

This week we are moving into one of those things that flows from who we are and who we are becoming as we spend time with Jesus—Forgiving. In our look at forgiving during the opening week, we learned that

there is no sin so big that Jesus did not die for it at the cross.

It is crucial that we see both sides of this. We need to apply it to ourselves and realize that every horrible thing we have ever done is forgiven by the perfect life and innocent death of Jesus. And then we need to apply it to everyone else and realize that Jesus lived, died and rose for every single one of their sins as well. In the life of Jesus, being forgiven and forgiving others always go hand in hand. How did He teach us to pray? *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

With that in mind, let's dig into this parable of the wicked tenants. Jesus is telling a parable that the hearers will immediately understand is based on a passage from Isaiah (our Old Testament lesson). Isaiah talks about a vineyard that is built, with a fence, a tower, a wine press. So when Jesus starts out His parable with those exact images, His Jewish audience would have immediately made the jump to Isaiah. And that Isaiah story was a condemnation of the Jewish people. God says Israel is the vineyard He planted. He looked for good fruit from His vineyard and found only bad (the Hebrew language refers to it as "stink fruit"). Then, in Isaiah, He got even more specific. He said He had looked for justice and found bloodshed and looked for righteousness and found only the cries of the oppressed. Then God said in Isaiah that He would tear down the vineyard and let it be overrun by others.

So when Jesus starts out His parable in Matthew with the exact words from Isaiah, the Jewish audience knows nothing good is coming.

In the parable, the landowner builds a vineyard, leases it to tenants and goes away. This was not uncommon in the first century. There were many Romans who owned land in Judea and managed it from Rome. They would send servants to collect a portion of the crop as rent. When this happened in the parable, the tenants killed the servants.

At this point the landowner has every right to be furious and to use the military to have the tenants forcibly removed. But he doesn't. He sets aside His anger. This is important. This parable is talking about the Kingdom of God, remember. The landowner (God) sets aside His wrath and sends more servants. In reality this is what God has been doing for hundreds of years. He had been sending His prophets to Israel, trying to turn their hearts and produce the fruit He wanted, but they were rejected. The next set of servants is also killed. Again the landowner (God) has every right to be furious and use whatever means necessary to remove the murderous tenants. But He doesn't. Again, He sets aside His wrath and sends His son, hoping the tenants will respect the son.

They saw the son as the only thing standing between them and the vineyard and they killed the son, thinking they would get the land. This is not as absurd as it sounds. When a landowner died without heirs, the land often went to the tenants.

Then Jesus tells them that the landowner will bring those tenants to a wretched end and give the vineyard to someone else who will produce fruit for the landowner.

And then He quotes psalm 118, referring to Himself:

“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes”?

So, God had been sending prophets all these years looking for fruit from His people Israel, but they were not fruitful. They were not being who God called them to be. So God sent His Son. They rejected Him, killed Him. So God ripped the vineyard, the kingdom, away from them and gave it to others—the Gentiles, who would believe Jesus rather than reject Him, and they would receive the salvation that comes through faith in Jesus by grace because of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

That's what the parable means. And we could stop there and go home having learned a good Biblical history lesson. Except for one thing...

Young people, excuse me for a moment while I talk to the people who were watching television in 1984, when an 81 year old lady named Clara Peller became famous by speaking a 3 word phrase in a Wendy's commercial: "Where's the beef?"

"Where's the Beef?" It referred to the fact that the meat on Wendy's burgers was so big, it stuck out past the bun, while the meat on McDonald's and Burger King's burgers was so small that it was hidden by the bun. Clara Peller would look at one of those burgers and couldn't see the meat for the bun and would say, "Where's the Beef?"

That phrase quickly became part of the culture of the day as a catchphrase meaning "where's the substance?" or "where's the important part?" Walter Mondale even used it in presidential campaign in 1984.

So I ask you, people of God—people to whom the vineyard, the kingdom, has now been given: not "where's the beef?" but "where's the fruit?"

Where's the fruit? God is expecting fruit from His people. That was God's beef (I know) with the people of Israel in Isaiah 5 and throughout the Old Testament. He was looking for fruit. He was looking for "doing" that flowed from their "being" His chosen people and He wasn't getting it. The fruit was bad. Stink fruit.

God is looking for fruit from His people right now. The first fruit is faith. God simply wants us to believe Him and believe that all that He promises is ours by believing. That's how Jesus moves from stumbling block to cornerstone in our lives. We just open our hearts and trust that the perfect life and innocent death of Jesus wipes away our sins and gives us righteousness, forgiveness and eternal life. The whole Vineyard, the whole kingdom is ours because of Jesus. Our lives, our being, our identity is changed by faith in Jesus. We become new people, forgiven people, God's people.

And from that forgiveness given to us, forgiveness flows. Remember the landowner in the parable? He kept setting aside His wrath when He had every right to be mad. We do the same. It is part of that doing that flows from our being. We are forgiven. We forgive others. We produce the fruit of forgiveness.

And that's hard. People lie to us. People lie about us. People hurt us. People hurt someone we love. And for every one of them we are called to produce the fruit of forgiveness. That's hard. That's why we are calling this a challenge.

Let's go back to Isaiah one more time before we wrap up. God built this vineyard called Israel or His Chosen People. He put a lot of work into it. He looked for good fruit, but found only stink fruit. He gets more specific in the last verses of our Old Testament lesson:

Isaiah 5:7 The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice (mishpat), but saw bloodshed (mispach); for righteousness (tzedaqah), but heard cries of distress (tze'aqah).

There is some wordplay going on in the Hebrew language that I won't bore you with (or maybe I will). But look at what God was looking for and what He found.

He was looking for justice (when everyone has what God wants them to have) and righteousness (when everyone does the right thing). He found instead violence and cries of distress and oppression.

Violence and cries of oppression. That sounds a whole lot like 2020 Minneapolis to me. There is a lot of injustice accompanied by violence in our city this year. There have been a lot of cries of oppression.

This Tuesday our church staff went down to the George Floyd memorial. Our goal was just to be there, just to experience it and somehow grow. It was very powerful. We walked around and listened to people who lived in the neighborhood. The one thing that was unmistakable for me as I listened and talked to people was HOPE. This was a place where people were learning Hope and growing Hope. The churches in the neighborhood are a huge part of this. There is a vineyard in South Minneapolis growing good fruit.

And we are too. God in His grace has blessed St. Matthew and made us fruitful. But there is more to do. The world is shifting. The needs are growing. The Owner of the Vineyard is asking, "Where's the fruit?" It's in you, church. It's in you. Go be fruitful. Amen.