

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
October 8, 2023 – The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Parable of the Wicked Tenants  
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Matthew 21:33-46  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's passage from the book of Exodus describes the Ten Commandments given by God to God's people through Moses. They are the basis of the covenant, the special relationship between God and the people of Israel. They begin with this statement about God's relationship with the people. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." God introduces the law by reminding the people of how God rescued them. This is a relationship of salvation. And the proper human response to God's saving action is to live in accord with God's will. The law has been given to help us, to guide us in what it means, practically speaking, to behave in right relation to God and to one another. In the church we affirm the importance of the Ten Commandments.

Now let's look at the parable in this morning's gospel lesson. Jesus is speaking during the few days leading up to his death – Holy Week. He is teaching in the temple in Jerusalem, in the hearing of the religious authorities. These men are already angry with Jesus because he has been challenging them. They want to trap him into admitting to blasphemy. In a matter of days, they will succeed in their plot against Jesus.

The parable Jesus told is an allegory based on a passage from the prophet Isaiah (5:1-7). The Jewish religious authorities were schooled in the law and the prophets, and they would have understood the reference. In the story from Isaiah God planted a vineyard, expecting the vineyard to yield grapes, but it yielded wild or sour grapes, so God let the vineyard be destroyed. The message Isaiah gave was this: God made a covenant with the people of Israel and the people did not respond by living with justice and righteousness and obedience to the commandments of God. Therefore, because they had failed to live up to their part of the covenant, they would be destroyed by other nations.

We may think God sounds angry and harsh here, but that is not the sense of the passage from Isaiah. It begins, "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning this vineyard." And God pleads with the very people who have broken the covenant: "And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?"

In his parable Jesus expands on Isaiah's allegory. God is the landowner. The vineyard is Israel. The tenants are the Jewish leaders. The slaves are the prophets. The son is Jesus. So, let's "translate" the parable. God established Israel as God's people and gave the people blessings of many kinds. God left the leadership of the people in the hands of the religious leaders, who were to teach and guide the people in God's ways. God sent the prophets to remind the people about God's covenant and commandments. But the religious leaders rejected the prophets and treated them badly. Finally, God sent God's son, Jesus, to speak as a prophet to the people, hoping that he would be respected. But the religious leaders rejected and killed the son.

Jesus asks his hearers what God will do to the tenants in the parable. “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.’” So, the religious leaders listening to Jesus condemned themselves by their own words. They understood that the tenants in the parable deserved destruction at the hands of the landowner – just as in the allegory from Isaiah – but what they failed to understand and accept was that Jesus was talking about them, there and then, and that they deserved his words. They would not see, they would not change course, and so they plotted to have Jesus killed.

Jesus then makes another reference to the Hebrew Bible, to Psalm 118: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.” This refers to how God often “turns things upside down.” In the words of Mary in the Magnificat: “[God] has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” Matthew is making it clear that Jesus, though rejected and killed, will be the leader of God’s new people, those who recognize Jesus as God’s son, follow his teaching and his way of life, and produce “the fruits of the kingdom.”

That’s where we fit in. God has offered us love and the opportunity to respond to God’s love with lives of faithfulness. God has given us Jesus, to be our teacher, our prophet, our healer, our risen Lord and savior. We have the Law of Moses in the Ten Commandments, and we have the Summary of the Law, found in the Old Testament and quoted by Jesus: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.” We have the witness of the church and the holy people of God over two thousand years. We have our church today, and we have each other. Is there anything more that God can give us?

As we listen to this parable of Jesus, we don’t want Jesus to condemn us, do we? We don’t want to see ourselves as being in the wrong. But until our lives bear nothing but the fruits of God’s kingdom and until the thoughts of our hearts are nothing but love of God and all God’s children, we must admit that something about us is wrong, that we have not fully returned God’s love for us. Jesus teaches that when we are in that place of humility and repentance, God rejoices, like the father in The Parable of the Prodigal Son. When we refuse to see our faults, when we are self-righteous, when we value outward religious observance and refuse the transformation of our hearts that God desires, then we are very wrong indeed and dangerous. That’s what Jesus is saying in the temple of Jerusalem to the people whose responsibility was to teach and live the way of God.

God never stops reaching out to human beings with steadfast, limitless love. Jesus, just days before being betrayed by the people he came to save, looked out over the city of Jerusalem, and said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Doesn’t that break your heart?

God is offering us love and the grace to examine our hearts and our lives, to admit our faults and allow God to help us change. All for our own good. Are we willing to be gathered into the love God offers us, on God’s terms? So may it be. Amen.