

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

October 4, 2020

Psalm 80:7–19

7 Restore us, O God of hosts;

let your face shine, that we may be saved!

8 You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.

9 You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.

10 The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.

11 It sent out its branches to the sea
and its shoots to the River.

12 Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

13 The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.

14 Turn again, O God of hosts!
Look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,

15 the stock that your right hand planted,
and for the son whom you made strong for yourself.

16 They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your face!

17 But let your hand be on the man of your right hand,
the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!

18 Then we shall not turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call upon your name!

19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts!
Let your face shine, that we may be saved!

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 5:1–7

5 Let me sing for my beloved

my love song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard

on a very fertile hill.

2 He dug it and cleared it of stones,

and planted it with choice vines;

he built a watchtower in the midst of it,

and hewed out a wine vat in it;

and he looked for it to yield grapes,

but it yielded wild grapes.

3 And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem

and men of Judah,

judge between me and my vineyard.

4 What more was there to do for my vineyard,

that I have not done in it?

When I looked for it to yield grapes,

why did it yield wild grapes?

5 And now I will tell you

what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
6 I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and briers and thorns shall grow up;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice,
but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but behold, an outcry!

EPISTLE: Philippians 3:5–14

5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes

from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

THE GOSPEL Matthew 21:33–46 (ESV): 33 “Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. 34 When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. 35 And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. 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 have his inheritance.’ 39 And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 When therefore 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 let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”

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 marvelous in our eyes’?

43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. **44** And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. **46** And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

Sermon 38 – Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Fall On Me”

Matthew 21:33-46

Dear friends,

Our Gospel lesson is a kind of a wink-wink nudge-nudge example of parables. Interpreting this one isn't hard, this has all the subtlety of a modern political cartoon. But remember that parables aren't always about identifying the who and the what, there's things to learn from the overall as well. Jesus presents a deliberately ridiculous situation in His parable. He's talking about the transition of the majority of the church, but He's also talking about a deliberate, callous rejection to the point of murder, that of human beings and their God. We Christians do not reject God, so this is a difficult thing to apply to us. We try to embrace Him, even when so much is in the way, even when we have no understanding of the why or the when. Finding encouragement in a passage like this is a challenge, let's see what we can learn.

This is part of an arc, this parable, it has a place. Jesus has upped His game, He is growing increasingly confrontational and open to the authorities as we discussed a while back. He knows the Cross is in His future, and He is escalating His resistance to their

teachings. The authorities are now fully committed, they're going to get rid of Jesus if it is the last thing they do. The charged uncertainty of Jesus' relationship to the religious authorities has crossed a line for both parties. They are at the point of no return and they both know it. That is part of why He speaks these words, but the other part is the forecasting that needs to be done for both the disciples and the people of Jerusalem, the Jews in general. God does not bring the hammer down unexpectedly. He warns people first, and sometimes He does it for hundreds of years. Not this time, though.

“33 “Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. 34 When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. 35 And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.” There's a lot going on here, so we don't really have time to faff around. These are the prophets. That's who they represent. The vineyard is the promised land, the tenants are Israel. God sent His prophets to Israel and Israel's usual response was violence. God's voice has never been welcome among human beings, even to God's own people, and this parable illustrates that paradoxical but very human reflex. This is a brief recap of Old Testament history, God spoke to His people, and they responded by trying to kill His voices.

Again, these words are spoken in condemnation of both Israel and humanity in

general. They have to be said, because they are the truth. These are broad strokes, though. There were plenty of faithful, true, real believers throughout the Old Testament even as there are today. You and I are not rejecting Jesus, we're here, wanting to hear His words. So what's in here for us? It is a reminder of the judgment, a warning not to get careless, so you could take it as that. But this isn't us. So what do we do?

Let's keep going and see if we can see. **“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 have his inheritance.’ 39 And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 When therefore 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 let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”** I know it doesn't make sense to murder someone and expect to get the inheritance, that's seven different kinds of backward, but that's part of the point. It's a garish example of both violence and greed, and it illustrates the heart of the human condition. We all believe, deep down, we're better than this, we wouldn't do this. Only the worst kind of deviant would even think of such a thing? The challenge of the Scriptures has always been an honest examination of our heart. No, we're not. God tells us that this is who we are, we are the worst of our species. This kind of gross immorality doesn't come out of nowhere, it comes from us. You look at the headlines, at the world today, and I've heard it so many times, I've thought it

myself: I'd never do something like this. Who would? Who would do all that? The Scriptures corner us. They don't let us stay in that place of delusion. The answer is mercilessly clear: We would. We're all the same that way. The particulars may differ, how we sin may differ, but that doesn't matter. The heart is the same and the problem is the same.

The Jews answer this clearly, but Jesus has some nuance to deliver. Obviously, the owner of the vineyard will kill them and start over, duh? Jesus says, yes and no. **“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 marvelous in our eyes’? 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. 44 And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”** This is the transition point. The Promised Land and the promise, the kingdom of God as a whole, both the Holy Land and the Word of God, departed from the Jews and went out into the world. Obviously Jesus means this as condemnation, and it is, but there is grace here too. No longer are you and I, Gentiles, excluded by default. Now we are part of that promise too, we are part of that kingdom, we are part of Jesus. Israel as a land, Israel as a nation, these things mean nothing to God. Now, faith is the quality that God engenders in His people. Now, who your parents were doesn't matter, what matters it that you believe, and we do, and by this we are called children of God.

What about the crushing bit? Again, it's easy to see this as judgment on the Jews for their unbelief, it works fine for that. But this isn't just them, it is an ongoing concern. Jesus doesn't move. He doesn't change. He doesn't evolve. He is there, He is crucified, He is given to us. That endless loop, that cycle, doesn't change either, the sinner and the saint, the need for forgiveness and the going out with that same forgiveness into life. That unchanging nature, like a rock, is something Jesus reflects in His parable. He is like a rock, and rocks are hard. You hit a rock, and you're going to feel it. Our sinful flesh does this all the time. We want something, anything else. We want Jesus to be who He is not, to be who we expect or want Him to be rather than who He actually is. The Jews wanted Jesus to play their game by their rules. He didn't, and so they tried to kill Him. That breaking is not always a bad thing, sometimes it breaks us in the right direction, so to speak, but it remains breaking and thus painful for all.

So what do we take from this? We take the promise that we're given. We take the promise that we are God's people, and thus we produce its fruits. We take comfort in what Christ has won for us, forgiveness of sins, life everlasting. We take that comfort, that sense of peace, out into a world that has forgotten the meaning of it. We take it into our families, our jobs, our community and our nation, somehow. We live as Christians in this world, at peace with the reality of death, looking to the cross of Christ for our security and our goal. At the end, it is all we have to hope in. We are the not-so-new tenants of His vineyard, the Word of God. We eat and drink what it gives us. We care for it by keeping that word

healthy among us, by repeating it, learning it, mastering it.

Let God judge the world. He will do so. Our task is to be Christian, not to change things. Change comes when and where God wills it, we can do our little things to be part of that process, but not too much more. God speaks His Word of judgment to those who are not faithful, who do not hear that word in passages like this. While we echo that kind of thing, the first direction we echo it is back to ourselves. That's awfully hard to do because we generally think and are better than that, but what if we aren't? We cannot see what God sees when He looks at us, all we know is what He tells us. We are sinners, like them. Reprobates, like them. We need to be better, like them. Likewise, He tells us we get better, we get Jesus, like them.

Amen.