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~ Matthew 21: 33-46 ~

Rev. Sheldon Gattinger

Zion Lutheran Church, North Battleford, SK

Gospel: Matthew 21:33-46

[Jesus said:] "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went away. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them in the same way. Then he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 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."

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?'*

"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

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

Grace and peace be with you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear friends,

Let's be honest: this is not an easy parable to hear. It's dark, violent, and unsettling. Servants are beaten and killed. The owner's son is murdered. Then Jesus asks a chilling question: *"When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"* The answer comes quickly from the crowd: *"He will put those wretches to a miserable death."* It's not exactly the kind of Gospel lesson we would choose if our goal were to leave church feeling comfortable.

But before we focus on the violence, notice how the story begins. It begins with generosity. A landowner plants a vineyard, builds the fence, digs the winepress, erects a tower, and then entrusts it to tenants. Before there is any failure or conflict, there is gift. The tenants did not create the vineyard. They did not earn it. They received it.

That is also the pattern of God's relationship with us. Life itself is a gift. Our time, our abilities, our resources, our relationships, and even our faith are gifts. God always begins with grace. As Lutherans, we know this well. We do not work our way into God's favour. We do not earn a place in God's vineyard. We are welcomed and entrusted with what belongs to God because of God's grace.

The trouble begins when the tenants forget that. They start acting as though the vineyard belongs to them. And that is where this parable stops being a story about someone else and starts sounding a little closer to home. The tenants' deepest problem is not their violence. The violence is only a symptom. The real problem is that they stop seeing themselves as caretakers and begin seeing themselves as owners.

If we're honest, that temptation is familiar. We live in a culture that constantly teaches us to secure what is ours, protect our interests, and put ourselves first. It becomes very easy to think in terms of *my life, my money, my plans, my time, my church, my way*. Before long, we begin to forget that everything we have has ultimately been entrusted to us by God.

That is why the arrival of the owner's servants feels threatening to the tenants. The servants remind them that the vineyard is not theirs. The owner's claim exposes the lie they have come to believe. Sin often works like that. It is not simply breaking rules. It is forgetting reality. We forget who God is, who we are, and whose world this really is. We convince ourselves that if we can hold on tightly enough, control enough, and secure enough, then we will finally be safe.

When God's voice comes to us through Scripture, through conscience, through neighbours in need, or through the call to repentance, we do not always welcome it. We may not react with stones and clubs, but we know how to ignore God's claim on our lives. We know how to dismiss it, postpone it, or explain it away. That is the Law speaking. Not to humiliate us, but to tell us the truth about ourselves.

Yet the most surprising part of this parable is not what the tenants do. It is what the owner does. He keeps reaching out. He sends servant after servant. Every rejection is met with

patience. Every refusal is answered with another attempt to restore the relationship. Then, in what seems like a completely unreasonable act, he sends his son.

By that point, everyone listening knows it is a terrible idea. The tenants have already shown exactly what they are capable of. And yet the owner sends him anyway. That is the moment when the story becomes less about wicked tenants and more about the God Jesus reveals.

Again and again throughout Scripture, we meet a God who refuses to give up on people. God keeps calling. God keeps pursuing. God keeps reaching out. Prophets are sent. Messengers are sent. Opportunities for repentance are given. Finally, God sends the Son. Not because humanity has earned another chance, but because God's love is more persistent than our rebellion.

When Jesus asks what the owner should do, the crowd answers according to the logic of the world. If violence has been committed, then violence should be returned. If there has been wrongdoing, then punishment should follow. Retribution seems obvious. It seems fair. It seems inevitable.

But the Gospel tells a different story.

As Matthew's Gospel unfolds, Jesus himself becomes the beloved Son who is rejected and killed. Like the son in the parable, he is cast aside by those who do not want the owner's claim on their lives. Yet when Good Friday gives way to Easter morning, God answers violence in a way nobody expected. God does not respond to violence with greater violence. God responds with resurrection. God does not answer hatred with revenge. God answers hatred with forgiveness. God does not destroy sinners. God raises the dead.

That is the heart of the Gospel. The rejected stone becomes the cornerstone, not through force or domination, but through grace. What human beings reject, God redeems. What human beings kill, God raises. What looks like defeat becomes the beginning of new life.

At the conclusion of this parable, Jesus begins teaching about "fruit"...

Whenever Christians begin talking about fruit, people sometimes become nervous. We assume we are about to hear another reminder to try harder, do more, and be better. But that is not what Jesus is saying here. We are not saved because we produce fruit. We are saved because of Jesus Christ. Full stop. We are justified by grace through faith for Christ's sake, now and always.

The question is not whether we can produce enough fruit to keep our place in the vineyard. The question is what happens when people who have already been claimed by grace begin to live from that grace. Justification does not simply forgive us. It frees us. It frees us from the exhausting burden of trying to save ourselves. It frees us from fear and scarcity. It frees us from constantly proving our worth.

When people are set free in that way, fruit begins to grow. It grows not because we are afraid of punishment, but because we have been overwhelmed by grace. Fruit looks like generosity rather than hoarding. It looks like welcoming rather than excluding. It looks like

justice rather than self-protection. It looks like peacemaking in a world that often prefers conflict. It looks like using what God has entrusted to us for the good of our neighbours.

None of this earns God's love. Rather, it flows from God's love already given. Grace always comes first. Fruit follows.

Dear friends, this is a difficult parable because it tells the truth about us. It exposes our tendency to cling, control, and claim ownership over what was never ours to begin with. But it also tells a deeper truth about God. God keeps coming. God keeps calling. God keeps loving. Even when the Son is rejected, God raises him. Even when death appears to have won, resurrection has the final word.

So what will the owner do?

In Jesus Christ, we finally see God's answer. Not violence for violence. Not vengeance for rejection. But mercy. Resurrection. Grace. And through that grace, sinners like us are welcomed into God's vineyard and entrusted once again with the joyful work of bearing fruit for the sake of the world.

In the name of Jesus. *Amen.*