

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today in our Old Testament lesson we hear that Isaiah wants to sing a love song concerning his friend's vineyard. I'll bet none of us are singing a love song concerning the vineyard because we've heard parables about the vineyard now for the last three weeks running. I just love parables, but I am not going to be singing about them today, nor anytime soon...I enjoy them but not enough to sing about them so I'll just enjoy them by preaching about them to the best of my ability.

I know there is reluctance toward parables, but they are simply an everyday story with a hidden spiritual meaning, designed to compare the things in this life, familiar things and comfortable things...to a deeper truth...such as the kingdom of heaven and the revelation of God. Jesus is dealing primarily with agricultural communities and this is reflected in the way in which Jesus teaches the parables and why we hear so much about seeds, bearing fruit, and the harvest. Farming is what the people know and it is what Jesus uses to reveal the kingdom of God to them, and to reveal the grace of God through them.

Looking at all the Gospel readings over the last few weeks, one can easily see that the vineyard itself is the one constant functioning thing throughout all the teachings. While all the folks involved with the vineyard are either working in it, being sent to it to collect from it, or claiming ownership of it, all seem to be a bit dysfunctional, but the vineyard is not. Within these parables a vineyard is established, it functions, and it bears fruit, but it needs workers to tend to it. The parable before us today is probably one of the more violent of the parables concerning the vineyard. Nonetheless, the parable, like the others raises the question, what is the vineyard...what does it represent? We know that God plants it, puts a fence around it to protect it, installs the equipment in it to make it functional, and we see that there is a place to keep watch over it, and most of all, God has leased it out...but what is it? What is the vineyard representing for us?

Some prophetic passages within the Old Testament equate the vineyard to Israel. In the parable before today, Jesus seems to compare the vineyard to the temple or the central source of worship in that region. Today, the vineyard can represent the church. But looking closer at the vineyard within the context of the culture and when comparing the vineyard to the modern-day church, there are some points to be made *against* this conclusion.

I think it is very clear that the landowner is God. The Greek term tells us that the landowner or the householder is the master, the owner, or the lord of the land who possesses absolute authority and governance over the property. We learn today that the vineyard is in God's continuing care and that God has leased it out. The tenants are those to whom the vineyard is entrusted...they represent the leaders of Jerusalem, the chief priests, the Pharisees, the scribes, and the elders. Today it could be said that the tenants are the ministerium or the leaders of the church, the pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, pastors, preachers, deacons, and so on. This is why the chief priests and the Pharisees were upset with Jesus and wanted to arrest him because they realized he was referring to them as the tenants within the parable. They are after all, the ones called to care for the vineyard. The slaves or the emissaries that are sent by the landowner are viewed as prophets and messengers from God. And of course, the landowner's son is Jesus, the one sent to straighten up the mess made in the vineyard by those called to care for it, and they end up killing the landowner's Son.

When we look at the violence within this parable, we see that the tenants, those who are called to care for the vineyard are the most violent within the parable. The ones called to care for them vineyard are behaving less like guests and more like owners and managers of the vineyard. The conflict here in this parable is that... the tenants are mistaken about what belongs to someone else. They are mistaking the vineyard as their own possession. The owner may seem to be an absentee landowner but the verbs in the opening verse may say something differently...the owner, “planted,” He “put” the fence around it, He “dug” the wine press, He “built” a watchtower, He “leased” it to the tenants, and then He “went” to another country. Jesus sets this parable up to show the owner’s absolute love for and absolute ownership of the property. And when the owner “went away,” the tenants attempt to steal or divert what has been entrusted to them and NOT given to them.¹ And from that assumed ownership we see the violence toward those the owner sent. We see that these tenants beat one, killed one, stoned one, and then kill the owner’s son. And from this violence we have Jesus threatening that:

...the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. (Matthew 21:43b)

Ahh yes, the fruits of the kingdom! We all as Christians want to bear good fruit and we even claim that we bear good fruit...as if we have the ability to do so. However, we cannot will a plant, or a vine, or a tree to bear fruit. We can only care for them and nurture them in order *for them*, the plant, the vine, or the tree to bear fruit. If a vineyard does not bear fruit can it even be considered a vineyard? The plant, the vine, or the tree is identified by the fruit it bears. Most, when analyzing or parsing out this parable conclude that the vineyard is God’s kingdom, I see the vineyard as the very faith that has been leased to us.

Faith is NOT ours; it is simply given to us to nurture and care for and it is through this care and nurturing that bears fruit and not through my will or ownership. Looking at the vineyard in the context of this parable we see that the vineyard is steadfast, it is the one constant, it is unfailing and good, and it is leased out or given and requires care and nurturing to produce fruit. And like our faith, it is given to us, it is used and worked by us and by the others around us, it does not function in a vacuum by itself, it is working with us and others, all with the owners blessing...the vineyard is our faith and God has called us into that faith, to work in that faith and the fruit or the produce of that faith belongs to God and NOT us.

The vineyard is the faith given – and comes to us from God and it does not fail...and yes, it is good, very good. We work in it and it bears fruit, not on our merit but on God’s reassurance and blessing. And when we look at faith and what it means and how it functions, this is what we confess about that faith:

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,

¹ Van Harn, Roger E.. *The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: Gospels*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. The commentary based on the appointed Gospel reading for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, Matthew 21:33-46, page 123.

and the life everlasting. Amen

Within these very words known as the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed, we understand them to mean that:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.

Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.²

The reality of this parable is what Luther said about our faith in his explanation of the Creed. That God, through the Holy Spirit has planted a vineyard called faith into our hearts through our Baptism. In the liturgy of Holy Baptism we hear that:

...our gracious heavenly Father liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are born children of a fallen humanity; in the waters of Baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church which is the body of Christ. As we live with him and with his people, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.³

Through Baptism, our faith is nurtured with water and a promise that assures us that we are God's own children. Through the Holy Spirit, God has "leased" to us a faith that we are called to tend and nurture. And even with all that nurturing work we still do not own it, it is given just like the grace that it reveals to us. When we claim ownership, we judge and violently veil and mask the fruit of grace and faith and in turn we destroy the fruit of the vineyard that God entrusted to us. The God whom we worship does not show ownership of each of us through selfish greed, hostility, or violence, rather we worship a God who shows ownership through trust, grace, forgiveness and love. That loving and grace-filled God has given to each of us a faith to nurture and tend to, why should our response to these things be judgmental, selfish, and hostile?

We have been called, and we have been blessed to work in this vineyard of faith, it is not ours to own but it is entrusted to us to work as if we owned it. Nonetheless, we are but stewards who have been entrusted with good things that ultimately belong to God. St Paul reflects this as he reminds us as he reminded the Church in Corinth in his letter to them:

¹⁹Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

We are not owners of our faith, we have been given the blessing of faith, a lease, if you will that is the revelation that righteousness of our own does not come from the law, but comes through

² Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. The Small Catechism, The Creed, The Third Article: Being Made Holy, page 355-356.

³ Lutheran Book of Worship. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1978. Order of Holy Baptism, page 121.

faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith that has been planted in us and is leased to us by a God who is determined to judge us through the love manifested in Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen