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Pentecost 20

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

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“The Folly of Sin and Grace”

Text: Matthew 21:33-43 (Isaiah 5; Philippians 3)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard that we heard as the Holy Gospel this evening is a parable that is both easy to understand and hard to understand. On the one hand, it's a pretty easy story to grasp. A man with a really nice vineyard was going on a journey, apparently for some time, and needed people to take care of his vineyard for him while he was gone. So he hired some tenant farmers, which was not an unusual arrangement, and as the owner he would get a certain percentage of the fruit as rent, and the workers would keep the rest as their pay. It really was a win-win situation. But somewhere along the line the workers got other ideas and wanted it all. And the problems began.

Now that's the easy part of understanding this parable; the hard part is trying to figure out why everyone did what they did! As far as the tenant farmers are concerned, talk about “*Biting the hand that feeds you!*” Did they really think they were going to get away with it? Did they really think that by killing the son they were somehow going to become the inheritors? The man was still alive and so nobody was going to inherit anything yet, and even if he wasn't, what made them think they would get it? And so they take a good situation – good work in a good vineyard with a good return – and mess it up completely. It's hard to understand what they were thinking.

But then there's the owner of the vineyard too. What was he thinking? For, as expected, he sends some of his servants at harvest time to collect his share of the fruit as rent. But they got more than they bargained for! “***The tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.***” Now after something like that, who in their right mind would send more servants to these ungrateful wretches? Well . . . the owner does, and the same thing happens again! Now, you think it'd be time for the owner to go in and “kick some . . .” . . . well, you know! For he's not only losing his rent and control of his vineyard, but he's lost a bunch of good servants! . . . But what does he do? He sends his son! “***They will respect my son,***” he thinks. But I don't know why he thinks that! And sure enough, they don't. . . . It's hard to understand what this owner was thinking.

But perhaps this “hard to understand” stuff is part of the point of this parable. That sin

doesn't make sense, and that the grace, mercy, patience, and perseverance of God also doesn't make sense. Or, if you will, the "folly" of sin and grace.

For consider sin. The sin that we see around us in the world, the sin that we do, and the sin that is in us. Why do we do what we do? Why do we sometimes do what we know is wrong? Why do we "*bite the hands that feeds us?*" Because that's really what we're doing, isn't it? Taking what God has given us and trying to keep it for ourselves? Taking good things from God and using them for sin, for evil? Thinking that what I have – "*my body and soul and all things*" – is mine, and so I can do with it whatever I want? Isn't that the attitude of our world today, that has even infected us? . . . It doesn't make sense, does it? We heard in the Old Testament reading from Isaiah what a wonderful vineyard, a wonderful creation, what wonderful blessings God has given us and showered upon us. And yet the sad lament, right in the middle of those verses: "***What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield good grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?***" It just doesn't make sense.

Oh, we think it does! We *think* it makes perfect sense – that's why we do it! But it is the twisted words and lies and empty promises of Satan that we're listening to, that we're following, that make it seem to make sense in our minds. But when we do that, do you see? We're listening to the one who hasn't given us anything instead of the One who has given us everything! And that's what doesn't make sense. . . . Why do we think the wisdom of the world is so wise? How many people don't know what God has said in His Word, but sure do know what Oprah and Dr. Phil said last week! . . . Why do we think this vineyard is ours and we can do whatever we want with it?

But now consider God's response to all of this. His response of such grace and mercy and patience and perseverance. To His people in Old Testament times, He sent His prophets. And not just one or two, but many. Over and over and over again. And you know the names: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, Joel, and more. And what happened to them? They were beaten, killed, and stoned. And the last Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist, he was beheaded. But still God did not give up. . . . We would have! We would have tossed such ingrates long before that! Why God puts up with so much sin and rebellion, really doesn't make sense does it? Maybe that's why so many people "can't" come back to church . . . thinking that they're unworthy and have used up God's patience. . . . But no, that's not the case, because there's one more step that God is willing to take, and that is to send His Son.

Now didn't the owner of the vineyard know what was going to happen? Did He really think they wouldn't kill His Son after killing all the servants who came before Him? . . . "***When therefore 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 that indeed

is what those wretches deserve, isn't it? That is indeed what all of us wretches gathered here today deserve too, isn't it? For we are accomplices in this murder, aren't we? We even admitted it earlier, **"We justly deserve your present and eternal punishment."**

But here is where this parable takes an unusual turn, a Gospel turn. For there is a prophetic statement in this parable, that when it was said was meant one way, but which God then turns on its head, and makes it come true in a wholly different way. For example, when during Jesus' trial Caiaphas said, **"It is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."** That was prophetic – even though Caiaphas meant it one way, and God made it come true another way. And so also here. When the tenant farmers **"saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.'"** And while they meant that one way, God made it come true another way. For it is indeed through the death of the Son that God sent, Jesus Christ, that we wretched and rebellious sinners become the heirs, the inheritors of the Kingdom of God and eternal life. But not because it was our sinful plan, but because it was God's plan. **"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes."**

And we see once again that God can use the evil that we do, that is in our hearts, that really doesn't make sense, and turn it around and use it for His own good. A demonstration that He is indeed the Almighty One. A demonstration of His love, because God wants us to have the vineyard! He wants us to live in His wonderful creation, with His wonderful blessings, and ultimately to live in Heaven with Him forever. He doesn't want to take that away, even from us who are sinful and rebellious. . . . I think sometimes we forget that, thinking that Heaven is a place that we want to be and forgetting that God wants us there with Him too. So much so that He did the unthinkable, and sent His Son to us wretches, **knowing what would happen**. Knowing that His Son would die. But so that in the death and resurrection of His Son, we too might become sons, leaving behind our subversive and sinful ways and living a new life, no longer as tenants, but as children, members of the royal family.

And so we have become the heirs after all, and the Kingdom of God has been given to us. Given to us here as we hear the Word of God, the family story, and we become a part of that story. Given to us here as we are born again and adopted into the family in Holy Baptism. Given to us here as we have a seat at the Table, eating and drinking the holy food, the holy body and blood of the Son who came and died for us. . . . And established in our place in God's family, we produce the fruit that God is looking for; the fruit that He desires most of all. **The fruit of repentance**. For that is indeed what the prophets continually came looking for and proclaiming to the people. God's not really interested in your money, or your things, or that you do without – no, He wants you to enjoy what

He has given to you. What He wants is you. And that is indeed what repentance is all about. Repentance is not just saying your sorry for what you did so you can get away with it – it is returning to God. It is returning to our place in the family, for when we sin we are not acting as sons, but as rebellious tenants.

Now, if we want to be just tenants, if we want to live and act as if all that we have in this world and life – *my body and soul and all things* – is mine and I can do whatever I want, we can do that! And many do. As we heard in the Epistle earlier, ***“For many . . . walk as the enemies of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”*** But if you want to be a tenant, know that you will receive the tenants reward: ***“Therefore I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you . . .”***

But that is not who you are! Because in Christ you have been changed. In Christ, you have been made a son, a child of God, and an heir. In Christ, ***“your citizenship is in Heaven.”*** In Christ, the Kingdom of God has been given to you, and you, in turn, produce its fruit. The fruit of repentance. The fruit of faith. The fruit of lips that confess His Name. . . . But that’s not the end of the story, for the story goes on. For now it is in you, that God is still sending His Son into the vineyard, as Christ lives in you and you go and live your life in the world. And perhaps for that you also will be rejected, beaten, killed, stoned. And when that happens, we sometimes think, *“Didn’t God know that would happen?”* . . . Oh, He knew. Just as with His only-begotten Son, God sends you, places you, uses you, **knowing what will happen**. And we know that even if evil should befall us, that God can use evil for good, and that even should we die at the hands of tenants, that what awaits us is resurrection and life, and our inheritance in Heaven.

And knowing that, we have freedom. Knowing that, we have confidence and boldness. And knowing that, we can identify with St. Paul, who wrote in our Epistle: ***“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. 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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

