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Lent 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Hope for Wicked Tenants”

Text: Luke 20:9-19

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

Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ* has produced a lot of controversy – and one of those controversial issues (perhaps the most controversial) is whether or not this film is accusing the Jews of having killed Jesus. When this question is put to Gibson, he correctly says that yes, the Jews killed Jesus because there weren’t any Norwegians there! (Or Germans, or French, or whoever.) . . . But while that answer is correct, it is not complete. There is more to it than that. And so in answering this question, Gibson also hastens to add that while yes, the Jews killed Jesus, *even more* the guilt of killing Jesus falls **to himself**; to his sin; to his guilt. The Jews are not more guilty or more to blame than he is – we are all responsible. And as Lutherans, we applaud such an answer. Jesus was on the cross paying not just for the sins of *others*, but for *my* sins. My sins put Him there. My sins inflicted His punishment. . . . But, you know, saying that is one thing; believing it is another. Because if you believe that, then when you heard the parable that Jesus told in the Holy Gospel that we heard this evening, you should have thought: “*Those wicked tenants that killed the Son – that’s not just the Jews; that is me.*”

But we don’t tend to think that way, do we? Because we don’t *like* to think that way. This parable Jesus spoke to the *Jewish* leaders, and He was indicting the *Jewish* leaders and nation, right? God had chosen these people to be His own, had brought them out of Egypt with His power, had blessed them on their journey, and had planted them in the land that He had promised to give them – the Promised Land of Canaan. But they were not giving back to Him His due. They were turning to the false gods of the land. And so God sent prophets to His people – like Elijah and Elisha, and Isaiah and Jeremiah – so His people would repent and turn back to Him and believe. But they would not listen. Over and over, more than the three times of the parable, God sent His prophets, and the people mistreated them and rejected them. And now finally, God sent His Son. His beloved Son. And in just a few days, they were going to kill Him too. And so, Jesus asks, “*what will the owner of the vineyard do?*” They answered, “*He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.*” And the traditional interpretation of that has been that God has done that very thing, for now the Church has been given to

others, to the Gentiles, to us. The Church is the *new* Israel of God.

But that explanation sounds an awful lot like “the Jews killed Jesus” doesn’t it? And just as with the movie, while that explanation is correct, it is not complete. It is true (as far as it goes), but it does not go far enough. There is more to it than that; because this parable applies to you and me as well.

For just as God chose the nation of Israel to be His own, so He has chosen us to be His own. We did not choose Him, He chose us. Through Holy Baptism, we have been rescued from our slavery to sin, and God has planted us in His vineyard called the Church. He has blessed us and prospered us greatly. But are we, like those wicked tenants, not giving God His due? Are we keeping God’s good gifts to ourselves? Are we also turning to false gods? . . . If we’re serious when we say that it was my sins that crucified Jesus; that my sins inflicted His punishment, then we are admitting that **these statements are true**. For we too have the words of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, and the preaching of the Word. But are we listening, or do we kill those words that enter our ears before they can enter our hearts? . . . And so we have to admit that if we’re going to put ourselves into this parable, there is only one place we fit: we are the wicked tenants.

“What then will the owner of the vineyard do to [us]? [Will He] come and destroy [us] and give the [Church] to others?”

The people face-to-face with Jesus, convicted by this parable, responded ***“Surely not!”*** And similarly convicted, that is our response too! That is our hope; that is our plea. That unworthy and wicked as we are, God will not condemn us, but have mercy on us. That though we deserve and have every expectation of judgment, surely that will not be our fate. Surely not, Lord! Surely not.

The question then is: how then do we escape such a fate? And Jesus gives the answer: ***“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”***

Now, that’s kind of cryptic, and doesn’t really sound like good news! But it is. Because it makes *an important distinction* – between those who are broken, and those who are crushed. And while both hurt, one is permanent, and one is not.

The stone that Jesus is talking about there is Himself. And first are those who ***“fall on that stone and are broken to pieces.”*** Christ and His cross are a stumbling stone to all of us who want to be self-sufficient; who want to save ourselves; who want to think that

we're pretty good and can do it on our own. The cross contradicts all of that. For the truth is that try as I might, I cannot be good and I am not able. I do not and cannot love God with all my heart and soul and strength; and I do not and cannot love my neighbor as myself. I can't. I try. I can't! I keep loving myself first! I am a wicked tenant. . . . Oh, I might be able to do some good things here and there, but is the good that I do not like a drop in the ocean of my sin? And what about making up for the wrong that I have done? Is this not impossible? And as I noted last week, even if we could make up for what we have done . . . *if* . . . we still could not fix the broken hearts we have left behind. The sin may go, but the guilt remains. I am broken. I am a failure.

That's hard to admit, isn't it? It's a stumbling block! Easier is to admit that we've failed *at certain things*, but that I've succeeded too! . . . But no, its all or nothing. You're either broken or you're not. And if you're broken, you're a failure. . . . And so we take our seats with the failures; with the wicked tenants; with the broken and condemned; with the beggars and the sinners; with the blind and the lame and the deaf; with the prostitutes and the tax collectors; and we cry out with them, "**Lord, have mercy on me!**" We repent.

And once broken by the cross in that way, the cross then also becomes the way of resurrection. For God humbles us so that He can exalt us; He lowers us so He can raise us; He breaks us so that He can heal us. And that exalting, raising, and healing all take place when we are forgiven. When looking to the cross in faith we cry out *Lord, have mercy*, and Jesus responds, "**Father, forgive them.**" And with that, God sees us no longer as wicked tenants, but now as faithful tenants. Not because we are, but because we're forgiven. And in a paradox, what the wicked tenants said in the parable comes true! "**Let us kill the Son, so that the inheritance may be ours.**" Jesus' death put His Testament – His *New Testament* – into effect, giving us His inheritance through the forgiveness of our sins. And all by God's grace and love. Because He does not relent in seeking for us, and being merciful to us, wicked tenants though we may be.

For what is the alternative? "**To be crushed.**" To not be broken and thus saved by the cross, but to be crushed by it. Crushed by its weight. Crushed because we try to carry it ourselves and pay by ourselves the price that is too much for us to pay. It may be hard to fall on our knees and admit that we are failures, but worse by far is to be crushed under the burden of perfection. To come before God on our own and think that He will not destroy us. For yes, God is love, but He is also just. And He is not love sometimes, and just at other times. He is always both, all the time. And so just as in His justice and righteousness He could not simply overlook our sins, or excuse them, or ignore them, so also in His love He paid the price for them Himself. And on the cross we see both – divine justice and love, on display for all to see. That we have hope. That "**all who believe in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.**"

For once the Son was thrown out of the vineyard and killed, what did the Father do with His Son? That question is not asked in the parable, but is the key. For what did He do? He raised His Son from the dead. And all of this would happen in less than one week from when Jesus spoke this parable. It would all be accomplished. It would all be finished. Our redemption, our atonement, our forgiveness, won by the death of God's Son at the hands of wicked tenants. But as He so often does, God used rejection and evil purpose for His good. He uses death to defeat death.

And so there is hope for us wicked tenants. Hope, for when the owner of the vineyard returns, He will not see us as those who killed His Son, but as ones for whom His Son died. And He will raise us broken ones, and give us His inheritance. And, in fact, He is doing that even now. For here we come before Him broken, in repentance, as sinners, and He is raising us up in forgiveness. He gives us a seat at His Table, where He feeds us. The body and blood of His Son, still coming to us, still giving Himself for us. The food of faith and life and forgiveness. Making all things new. Making us new.

For ***“the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”*** Thanks be to God!

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.