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Pentecost 21

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Faithful Vines are Fruitful Vines”

Text: Matthew 21:33-46; Philippians 3:4b-14

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

***Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.***

That is a rather frightening line. Even moreso coming from the mouth of Jesus. It is a warning we should take seriously. Our Lord expects fruit from His vineyard. There is no idea here of once saved, always saved. If you are a vine that does not produce fruit, you will not long remain in the kingdom of God.

If you are uncomfortable, good. You're supposed to be. The preaching of the Law is supposed to make you squirm, because you don't measure up.

But the truth is, you may be uncomfortable for the wrong reason. For in looking at yourself just now, and the fruits (or lack thereof) that you produce in your life, what did you look at? If you're like most people, you thought of and looked at *good works*. Am I doing all the good works that God requires? And am I avoiding all the sinful things God prohibits? Or in other words, **am I a good enough vine to remain in the kingdom of God?**

If that's what you were thinking, then you know why the Pharisees got so upset with Jesus. Because they were the good guys! They were the guys who kept the Law. They were the ones who even went above and beyond the call of duty, and kept the Laws to the nth degree! And so when they **perceived that Jesus was speaking about them** in this parable, well, they got a bit upset. And they probably thought: Why are you telling *us* this sermon, Jesus? Why don't you tell this sermon to those who *really* need to hear it? To all those tax collectors and prostitutes you seem to like to hang out with?

Many people today have that same reaction. Maybe also you, if you weren't uncomfortable before. For perhaps you are a fine, upstanding citizen, who helps out at the local school, pays your taxes, doesn't cheat on your husband or wife, doesn't gossip, works hard and loves your family, never killed anyone, and even gives money back to the cashier when she gives you the wrong change. And so

when the Church preaches that you are a sinner, maybe you get a little upset too, and think: Preach it to those who really need to hear it, Pastor. We're here. We're okay. It's all good.

But is it? And are you? And how do you know? Are you producing the fruits that God requires, or not? And are you producing enough?

Well, if the fruits that Jesus is speaking of here are good works, then you will never be able to answer that question. Not with any certainty. Because there is always more good that you *could* be doing, and more sin that you *should* be avoiding. And so you may assume you are good enough, or presume you are, or grade on a curve, or try to be in the upper half of the goodness scale, but you will never really know. *You will never really know.*

And so you will also never know if God loves you. If He really does. *If* His love is based on your performance. You may assume He does, or presume He does, but what about when you really screw up? What then?

But that's not all. For if the fruits that Jesus speaks of here are good works, then Christianity is just like all the other religions in the world. Do good, or enough good, and you'll be okay; you'll be in the kingdom of God. But if you are not good enough . . .

But Christianity is not like all the other religions in the world. And today's parable tells us why. Because God did what no other religion - which is based upon good works - would ever even dream of: **He sent His Son**. Didn't that part of the parable today jar you? Sending servants is one thing - but why would the owner send His Son? An executioner we could understand! Those tenants had beaten and murdered His servants, time and again. But His Son? Why? Why did He think they would *respect* Him?

If God was just looking for good works from us, then He could have stayed in heaven and thundered down more of His Law. But in sending His Son, He showed us this is not what He is about. He showed us that He is not a demanding God, but a giving God, a loving God, a serving God. A God who loves us, His vineyard vines, so much, that He would send His Son to suffer ***the miserable death*** that unfruitful vines deserve. And interestingly, that is how that verse in the parable could also be translated. Instead of rendering it: ***They will respect my son***, it could also be translated: ***They will put my son to shame***. Which is exactly what did happen, when just three days after Jesus told this parable, the Chief Priests and Pharisees were crying out, ***We have no king but Caesar***, and watched with satisfaction as the Roman soldiers pounded the nails through Jesus' hands and feet, attaching Him to the cross, to hang in shame and humiliation.

And yes, God knew it would happen. **They will put my Son to shame.** That is why Jesus came. Because Christianity is not first and foremost about *our* good works, but about this good work - God's good work, when on Good Friday God put the sin of the world on the back of His Son to make a world gone bad good again. That Jesus be shamed instead of us. And that in His shame be life for us. Life for us who are dead in our trespasses and sins.

And so the fruit that God is looking for is not good works, but faith. Faith not in our good works, but in His good work. Faith in His love and goodness and forgiveness. Faith in His Son, Jesus. Faith that a God who would send His Son for **a wretched wretch** like me loves me with a love I cannot begin to comprehend. But a love which is most certainly true. A love which calls me to faith in Him, to receive this marvelous work, done for me. For that is the highest and greatest worship of God: not to do good for Him, but to believe in Him and receive His good work. To repent and receive his forgiveness.

And so with this parable today, Jesus is calling us not to first and foremost to good works, but to faith. That the cornerstone of our lives be not what we do, but what He has done. That what we do is fall over Him at the foot of the cross, be broken to pieces in repentance, and be raised with Him to a new life. **And raised we are!** For still today Jesus is coming among us and working, calling us to faith, removing our sins, and raising us. And that work of forgiveness we will again receive here at this altar today, as the fruit of Jesus' good work, His cross work, is given to us here - His true body and blood, placed into our mouths, to raise us and to change us. That we be fruitful vines, faithful vines, good vines, His vines.

Now it is true, such a faith will produce good works. How could it not? The love and forgiveness and resurrection of Jesus that now lives in us will show in our lives. But it is not on such good works that we rely, but on Jesus and His good work. Faith produces good works from His good work. Faith receives its life from Him. For faith has no life of its own, but lives only in the death and resurrection of Jesus. His death and resurrection given to us here, as we are baptized, as we are absolved, as we are fed.

This is the faith that St. Paul spoke about today in Philippians. At one time he was one of those Pharisees, zealous for the Law, who even considered himself blameless. But all of his works were nothing compared to the glory of the work of Jesus for him. And so he calls them all rubbish, trash, garbage, anything that he did before. For he now has a righteousness that far exceeds that of the law - the righteousness of Christ, that comes by faith. The righteousness of Christ in the forgiveness of his sins. And so he is now what he was not before, and *could* not be before - a good and fruitful vine in the kingdom of God.

And so it is with you. And so with Paul we press on. In the good work of Christ. Living in Him and He in us by grace through faith, until we too receive **the upward call** to life eternal. And the voice that issues that call you will know, for it is the same voice that calls you to faith, that calls you to repentance, and that calls you to the table. The voice of your Good Shepherd who lived and died and now lives eternally for you. Who came and died for you, that you may go and live with Him.

So have no fear, children of God! We *need* have no fear. For your value comes not from what you do, but from what Your Saviour has done for you. Remain in Him, in His love, in His forgiveness, in His Word, and in His Sacraments. For faithful vines are fruitful vines, and as you live in Him and He in you, what is said of Him will be said of you: **You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.** (Mt 3:17; 17:5) Yes, with you God is well pleased! And pleased to give you His kingdom, both now, and forevermore.

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.