

21 March 2010
Lent 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Fruits of Faith and Love”

Text: Luke 20:9-20 [Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14]

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

The traditional name for this Sunday in the church year is *Judica* - the Latin word at the beginning of the phrase “Judge Me, O Lord.” And so we could call today “Judgment Sunday.” All through the season of Lent, we have been focusing on repentance; today we are reminded why - judgment is coming. The judgment of God. And to drive that point home, we heard a very hard parable from Jesus’ lips today. A parable of judgment.

A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while.

The people of Jesus’ day would have been familiar with that kind of arrangement. Many of the people were tenant farmers, working the land of another who lived far away. In this case, the owner had done the work: He prepared the land, planted the grapes, and basically did what we needed to virtually guarantee a harvest. The tenants had only to tend the plants, harvest the fruits, and pay the owner his agreed upon share. It was, by all accounts, a very nice place to be, and a simple enough arrangement. Except something went horribly wrong . . .

The tenants staged a revolt. When harvest time came, the owner’s servants, one after the other, were sent back empty-handed and beaten. The average landlord would have given up, evicted those tenants, and taken legal action - but not this one. This one, who had prepared such a wonderful vineyard, goes one step further . . . hoping against hope to receive a harvest; hoping against hope that these wicked tenants will turn from their evil ways.

What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.

It doesn’t make sense does it? What kind of father would send his beloved son to a bunch of people who have already mistreated his servants? . . . Well, when the tenants see the son, they assumed the owner was dead. And so they thought, ***“This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.”*** Which sounds crazy, but is actually quite possible. For if the owner of the land died and left no

heirs, the tenants could legally claim the land, and get it free and clear. So they take the son off the property (so they'll look innocent), and kill him.

What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?

He will then execute his judgment. For, you see, the son is the end of the line in the parable. He is the last word from the vineyard owner. Everything is riding on him. Reject the son and there is nothing but judgment. And so in the end, the tenants were not condemned because they were worse than any others tenants in the neighborhood, or because their harvest was poor - they were condemned because they rejected the owner's son. If you reject the son, you are lost.

Last week, we heard a parable from Jesus which described for us the great love the Father has for us miserable, wretched sinners. How much He wants us to return from our sin and receive His forgiveness and love. Today, we hear even more of His yearning for us - that though we have not returned to Him His share of the fruits of faith and love in our lives, He does not easily give up on us. And so today we heard of His longsuffering patience, His relentless mercy, and His passionate will to save us at all costs.

For in truth, we are the tenants who want to be the owners. Our sinful natures are never satisfied with some - we always want more; we want it all. Tell us, "Thou shalt not" and chances are that's the very thing we'll do next. From Adam and Eve, who were not satisfied with *all but one* tree in the Garden, to you and I today, the story is the same. We want to be the owner, not the tenants. And so we hear, and think, and live, and maybe even start to believe the myths of this age, that *"It's my money and I can spend it as I please. It's my body and I can do what I want with it. It's my time and I can use it however I wish. It's my life and I don't need God or the church or anyone to tell me how to live it."* And so acknowledge God as the owner and all this as on loan to me? That God wants a share of all this? Not so much.

How generous God has been with you! How much He has given you! How little He has asked for in return. And yet . . .

Think: who are the servants God has sent to you, to collect His share of faith and love? Who needs your time? Who needs your help? Who needs your care? Who needs your compassion, or a listening ear, or a sympathetic heart? A spouse, a friend, a neighbor, a stranger? Yet have you sent them away empty handed? Have you turned a cold shoulder or a deaf ear? Have you beaten or even killed them with your words, your anger, or your refusal to help? [ugh!]

It's easy to condemn those wicked tenants, isn't it? Until you realize . . . But at least we know we would never do that to the son, right? We're Christians! We believe in Jesus! We would never . . . But didn't Jesus say: *whatever you did for the least of these, you did it to me* (Matthew 25:40)? Oh my.

What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others. It's what we deserve, isn't it? And if Jesus had ended His teaching there, what would we do? *What would we do?*

But Jesus has not come to leave us in our sin, but to save us from it. But to save us, He must first break us. Of our pride, of our delusion of ownership, of our self-centeredness, of our cold and hard hearts. For, you see, when we poor, miserable, wretched sinner-tenants come up against Jesus, there are only two outcomes:

[Jesus said:] ***“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”*** So [#1] ***Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces,*** [or #2] ***when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”***

Now, *neither one of those sounds like a very good option!* Except it is good to be broken by Jesus. For He breaks in order to heal. He breaks us now, so that we will not be crushed and condemned in the end. He breaks us so that we will repent and find in Him - and not in our sin - what we have been looking for and yearning for all along.

For Jesus has promised us in His Word: *“A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”* (Psalm 51:17). Or in other words, when we are broken by our sin, broken by the Law, and in our brokenness repent, our Lord will not turn us away, or turn from us. No, our God who is longsuffering in His patience, relentless in His mercy, and passionate in His will to save us, makes us whole again. And speaks to us, time and time again, those words we can never hear enough: *I forgive you all your sins.*

How can He do that? Well, that's the piece of Gospel irony in this parable; that's the “new thing” of which Isaiah spoke - the thing that nobody could have imagined: that God would use the death of His beloved Son at the hands of wicked tenants to give life to the world, that *all* - even wicked tenants - *who believe in Him not perish, but have eternal life* (John 3:16). For God is not constrained by our sin, wringing His hands in heaven and mourning the death of His Son. No! This was His plan - to use sin to destroy sin. To send His Son to death to raise His Son from death. To execute His judgment against sin on Jesus, that it might not be executed on you. For our patiently longsuffering, relentlessly merciful, and passionately saving God *desires not one sinner to be lost, but that all turn to Him and live* (1 Tim 2:4). That our lives be built on the cornerstone of Christ, and His forgiveness and

life.

And is there any tenant too wicked, too far gone, too sinful? St. Paul gives us the answer to that question today. For, he says, if anyone was too far gone, it was me! But look what happened to me. What grace, what mercy, what forgiveness. And if it's true for me, then it's true **for you** as well.

And of that you can be sure, because you're going to hear those very words in just a moment. **For you.** The body of Christ, given **for you.** The blood of Christ, shed **for you.** For you, because Jesus came for you. To take your judgment, the judgment against sinners, and give you His life, the life of God. That you may live and not die. That God may do a new thing not only in the world, but *in you.* And when you eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus, that new thing is working in you. Forgiving you, raising you, changing you. That He live in you and you in Him, and so produce the fruits of faith by life in Christ.

And so you need not fear the judgment of God - now, or in the end. *It is finished* (John 19:31). It is finished in Christ. When you look to the cross, do not feel guilty, but loved. For that is the message of the cross, and the message of this season of Lent, and the message that we just sang (LSB #430): that you are loved with a love greater than you can know. A love that makes all things - even you and me - new (Rev 21:5). So come - come and fall on your Saviour with all the brokenness of your life, and He who was broken for you will raise you up and give you life, *just as He is risen from the dead, [and] lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.* (Small Catechism, Explanation to the Second Article)

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.

[Thanks to Rev. William Cwirla, who prior preachment of this text provided the inspiration - and some of the words - for this sermon.]