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Pentecost 18

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“What’s a God To Do?”

Text: Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46; Philippians 3:4b-14
(Psalm 118:1)

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

There are two things going on in the readings we heard today: bad grapes and bad tenants.

In the Old Testament reading, the reading from Isaiah, the problem was bad grapes, sour grapes, bad fruit. God had planted a vineyard - that’s His picture of the nation of Israel. He had planted them in the Promised Land, which He called a land flowing with milk and honey. That’s a pretty good place to be. He protected them, cared for them, fed them, and provided everything they needed. But what did He get? Bad grapes, sour grapes, bad fruit. The people turned to other gods. They didn’t walk in His ways. They either forgot about God or took His care and love for granted. Or, maybe this: they tried to have the best of both worlds. Have this God but do things their way.

But their way - *our* way - does not produce the fruit, the good, God is looking for. It never does.

In fact, it can lead to the second scenario we heard today: bad tenants. In the Gospel, the reading from Matthew, the problem wasn’t the fruit - it was that the tenants thought it was theirs. All theirs. Once you start doing things your way, once it becomes all about you, nothing else matters. In fact, if anything or anyone gets in your way, tries to hinder your plans or slow you down, they got to go. And so the servants the master sends are beaten, stoned, and killed. They don’t even respect the master’s son. Kill him too. Kill him and we’ll finally get what we want - it’ll all be ours. We’ll finally be rid of that meddling master, trying to tell us what to do and what to give. It’ll all be ours.

Bad grapes. Bad tenants. *What’s a God to do?*

Now clearly, these two stories were told in a particular context. Old Testament Israel had gone wild, and so God didn’t just *allow* them to be conquered by the nations around them, *He caused it*. That’s how He fulfilled the words spoken by Isaiah. Because His vineyard, His people, had gone wild, He had the armies of Israel’s enemies come in, break down their walls, trample them, and haul most of them off as prisoners of war.

But what, then, of the words that we sang in the Introit today? Twice!

***Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!***

If you were Old Testament Israel, marching away from your ruined land under the pointed spears of your foes, it sure seemed like God's love had an expiration date. That seems to be what Jesus is saying as well: ***Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.***

*So is God really good?
Does His steadfast love really endure forever?*

Or maybe we, today, considering these things, should say it like this:

*Is God really good for me?
Will He love me forever?*

Now, as good Christians, as good Lutherans, you know the answer to those questions here [mind]. But do you know it here [heart]?

Do you know it when your vineyard, your kingdom, all that you dreamed about and lived for and worked so hard for, is slipping away or being taken away? *Is God good? Does He love me?*

Do you know it when your enemies seem to be winning? *Is God good? Does He love me?*

Do you know it when you're doing things your own way because you don't believe that God's ways really work? *Is God good? Does He love me?*

Do you know it when there are parts of your life that you're holding onto, where you won't let God in, because you're afraid what would happen if you did? *Is God good? Does He love me?*

Do you know it when you're life is turning out quite differently than you thought or planned or hoped? *Is God good? Does He love me?*

It's easy to criticize Old Testament Israel or the Jews in Jesus' day when we hear stories like we heard today. But the truth is that there are bad tenants sitting in this room, in your chair. And sour grapes coming from your heart and mind and mouth.

So what's a God to do?

Because it shouldn't be, right? What has God done wrong? Oh, maybe you have a list of things you think God has messed up; things He could have done better if He had just listened to you! . . . *Really?* . . . Ever see a child push their parent aside and say "I know how to do it!" No he doesn't! So sometimes you let your child try and fail. And sometimes that hurts. You and him. Sometimes you stop your child from hurting herself. Sometimes you try to teach, and that's hard, too. But all those things come from love, even if the child doesn't realize it.

So too God. *Even more* God. Because as human parents we mess it up, we get it wrong, we *aren't* always filled with love. Well, too, God has to step in to save us. To save our lives. To save us from our sins, from ourselves, from each other, from our *I want it my way* bad tenants, sour grapes, life. It may sometimes seem unloving. We might push Him away. It's *my* vineyard. Don't come in here, Lord!

The apostle Paul was like that. We heard about him in the Epistle, the reading from Philippians. God had to knock him down and onto his butt - literally! - to get him to realize what he was doing. And that all he was doing was *rubbish*. Did God hate him? No, He loved Paul and had a plan for him.

And you too. I don't know what that plan is exactly and maybe you don't either. I don't know how it's going to all turn out. But it will probably be in a way we don't expect.

Last week at the conference I was at the presenter told the story of a little boy who broke one of the two bones in his forearm. The doctor didn't cast the bone right away. Instead, he asked the parents to leave the room for a moment, and then he took the boy's arm and snapped the other bone over his knee - *so that* the first-broken-bone would heal properly; that both would heal together. When they parents heard what had happened, they asked the boy if it hurt. He said no; it actually started to feel better right away.

In ways we do not expect. That's how it is all through the Bible. I think we've kind of lost that perspective, because a lot of the stories in the Bible are familiar to us and we don't get so surprised anymore. But if you could read the Bible again for the first time, I think you'd get to a lot of points where you think: *Oh, yeah, I know what God's going to do . . .* and then the exact opposite happens. He snaps the bone. And it doesn't seem right and it doesn't seem good, and the folks in the Bible wonder: *What are you doing God? Have you forgotten us God? Why is this happening, God? God, are you mad?*

Maybe you too?

Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed

him.

Good grief, God! Are you mad? After all that, what makes you think they will respect your Son?

Well, God was doing something marvelous. Something to marvel at. Something unexpected. Laying a *cornerstone*. And it's not just Jesus who is the cornerstone - His *gravestone* is the cornerstone. His gravestone that once sealed Him in the tomb, but now risen from the dead is that stone upon which He builds His Church. It's not Jesus as teacher or Jesus as a good man or Jesus as example or Jesus as moral leader, but *Jesus thrown out and killed* - but now risen and alive again - that is the cornerstone. That a Church can be built on. That our lives can be built on.

So the question really isn't: God, what are you doing? Or, God, do you really love me? But this: *What is God doing to save your life?*

What trouble is He not allowing you to get into? What difficulty is He keeping you in because it's ultimately going to help you? What trial is strengthening you? What weakness causing you to rely on Him?

Of course, you can go all sour grapes on Him. You can throw Him and His Son out of your vineyard. You can go after a life all your own rather than have His life that will last forever. You can do that.

Or, you can repent of all that rubbish in your life. But don't rely on your own judgment for that - because maybe you're nose blind to just how bad your life smells right now and you think you smell good and are doing pretty good. Don't believe your nose - or your eyes for that matter. Believe the Word of God. That what God says is bad really is bad, and what He says is good really is, too.

So whatever your life, your vineyard, looks like right now . . . if it's all dried up, it's nothing that the water of God can't make grow. The water of baptism which gives new life. If it's full of wild, sour grapes, it's nothing that the forgiveness of God can't make sweet and good again. And if your vines are all puny and weak and stringy, they're nothing that food of God can't strengthen. The Body and Blood of Jesus that change even the worst vines into good vines.

Because you really are, as Isaiah said, God's *beloved*. And God really did send His Son to die for you. And He is really working all things **to save your life**.

So maybe the words of the apostle Paul are good advice for us today.

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.

Straining. Pressing. Those aren't easy words. They're faith words.

My life isn't what I thought it would be. *I'll strain forward.*

Things are falling apart. *I'll press on toward the goal.*

I'm surrounded by sinners and those who hurt me. *I'll forgive.*

It's too hard, too confusing, too much. *I'll rely on His strength, not mine.*

I don't understand. *I'll rely on His Word, His wisdom, not mine.*

I can't do it. That's exactly right. But His cross which breaks is followed by resurrection. And not just on the last day - but even now. A new life for you now. Just ask Paul.

This is the Lord's doing; and it is marvelous.

The stone that the builders rejected [really] has become the cornerstone.

Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love [really does] endure forever!

And yes, **for you.**

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.