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Pentecost 18

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Grapes of Wrath?”

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

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

The master of the house, the man who planted the vineyard in today’s parable is not God. I mean, he *is*, but he *isn’t*. For the man in the parable is the poster child for what a fool looks like, and the very definition of insanity - doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. And God is neither insane nor a fool.

And yet what the man did *is* what God did. For God did send His servants, the prophets, to His people time and time again. To call them to repentance. To seek the fruits of repentance - lives of mercy and justice, of faith and love. What you would expect from children of a merciful, just, faithful, and loving God. What you would expect from those who got to live and work in the wonderful vineyard, the beautiful Promised Land, that God had given them and planted them in.

Now sometimes - *sometimes* - the people listened and repented. But most of the time they did not. *But this didn’t surprise God*. In fact, very often, when He sent His prophets, He told them before they went that the people were not going to listen and would, in fact, lash out against them - verbally and physically. And that’s exactly what happened - throughout the Old Testament *and* in the parable. Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel met with stiff resistance and were beaten, stoned, and killed.

And then God sent His Son. And while the man in the parable thought that perhaps things would be different with his son, and vengeance for killing him *is* how the world works . . . here’s how God is not, is *different*, than the man in the parable - **God knew the result would be the same**. God knew that sending His Son would mean His death. **And that’s the very reason He sent Him!** To be rejected by men, but *by whose very rejection* - by whose death! - He would be the cornerstone on which God would build His Church.

That is the surprising turn in this parable. The killing of the servants, the killing of the son, isn’t really. Murder is the first sin we’re told about after the fall of Adam and Eve. Hatred, greed, selfishness, rivalry, revenge . . . all is par for the course for sinful man. But look what God is doing, Jesus says! Look at what the Scriptures say! He would send His Son to die at the hands of sinful men. **That in His dying be your salvation.**

Now, some would say God really *is* a fool and insane for doing that! In fact, all the other religions of the world say that! That God would never do what Christians claim and send His Son to die - *if* He even has a son at all! Salvation is by you not being like that. By you changing. By you giving God what He demands. And if you don't . . . then yes, you *wretches* deserve *a wretched death*.

And if God ran things like the world runs things, that would be right. But if God is not like us - which thankfully is true! - then maybe He doesn't do things as we do them. Maybe *our* way is the foolish and insane way. Maybe sending His Son to die is exactly who God is and His plan from the very beginning, when He didn't demand that Adam and Eve shape up and do better, but instead promised them a Saviour. That there might be hope for them. And hope for us.

Hope like what the apostle Paul received. For he was one of those wicked tenants. He wasn't around when the prophets were sent, but he was one of the ones who rejected the Son of God. He was persecuting and arresting followers of Jesus until Jesus came to HIM - and in that moment, when the voice of Jesus and the blinding light of His glory threw the man then named Saul off his high horse and cast him to the ground - in that moment Saul was - as Jesus said - *crushed by the very stone he had rejected*. Just as the death of the Son was for the life of the world, so too the old, wretched Saul had to be slain so that a new man named Paul could arise. Which happened three days later when he was baptized (Acts 9).

And now you. Maybe you're a lot like Saul. Not that you're persecuting and arresting Christians! (At least, I hope not!) But like Saul, most of you were born into a good family. A Christian family. Like Saul, you were educated in the church; you were catechized and confirmed. Like Saul, you are active in the church and doing all those things you think you're supposed to be doing. Like Saul, most people would look at you and they would say: *There goes a good Christian!* And maybe you even believe it. Saul did. He thought he was doing everything right.

But he needed to be crushed. And so do you. So do I. For (to put it in the words of Isaiah, one of those prophets God sent): *why does God see so many wild grapes in your life?* Good grapes you can eat and make good wine. But wild grapes only use up space and good ground and are good for nothing. Like some of the words you say. Like many of the thoughts you think. Like actions you do that hurt others, or how you fail to help with your inaction. Like when you use the life God has given you all and only for yourself, not helping others but coveting - and then trying to get! - what others have for yourself. And maybe you do all those things and even look good *and wise* in the eyes of others. But God knows. And so He asks you, through His prophet today, *When I looked for [you] to yield [good] grapes, why did [you] yield wild grapes?* It's a rhetorical question. He knows why. He asks to get you to look at yourself and your life . . . and crush you.

But those God crushes He does to raise! For that's what God wants. For nothing else than His Son to be the cornerstone of your life. That you live a new life. A life that grows from and in Jesus.

For that stone is going to crush everyone. Did you catch that? Jesus said that *the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him*. Those are the only two alternatives! *The question, then, is when?* Will you be broken and crushed now in the day of salvation? Now in this time of repentance and forgiveness? Now when the **water** of Christ is here to wash you and raise you, the **Word** of Christ is here to absolve you when you fall, and the **Body and Blood** of Christ is here to feed you and strengthen you? Or when it is too late for all of that? When all there is left is judgment?

That's the road Saul was on until the Lord crushed him. Tough mercy! But mercy nonetheless. And then he had nothing but praise for God. Some would say he lost an awfully lot in this world and life - his place, his prestige, his honor. But as Paul said, that? *That was all rubbish!* Compared to Christ. His righteousness, honor, prestige, what he thought he was achieving, was garbage! Sure, it looked good at the time. But now? It stinks! Compared to the righteousness of Christ and all that Christ has given him.

And the world? The world thought Paul a fool and insane for the change in his life! They didn't see this change as good at all - in fact, it was a giant step down. And Paul paid dearly for it - he went from hunter to hunted; from persecutor to persecuted; from throwing others in prison to being thrown into prison himself. *Bad career decision Paul!* the world said. **But Paul knew better.** He now had a life that meant far more than the life he had before. And a life that would last longer, too. Like, forever.

And that is the life the master of the house, the owner of the vineyard, your heavenly Father, has for you, too. The world may think you foolish and insane for how you live and what you believe. But you know, like Paul came to know, that the master of the house, the owner of the vineyard, your heavenly Father, sent His Son for you, to die for you. And a God who would do that for you? Well that makes all the difference in the world.

So while the world looks at us like we have *less* life as Christians, we know it's not so - we have far more life than before. The world says: take the vineyard now! Do what you want, live like you want, now! Don't listen to that stodgy old master! He just wants to take from you. Keep it. You've earned it. What's true and good and right is what's true and good and right for you. You be the master of your life! And maybe that looks good and feels good . . . for a while. But as Paul learned, the way of the world, what it thinks is good, what it lives for . . . it's all garbage. Rubbish. And it's a life that won't last, but ends in death.

Far better is life in Christ. For that is a life that not even death can end. ***The Chief Priests and Pharisees who heard Jesus' parables perceived that He was speaking about them.*** And He was. But not because He was against them. He was for them, too. They needed to be crushed so they could be raised, just as we do. And Jesus wanted to. He hung on the cross for them, with their sin, too. He was God's gift for them, too.

And when you realize this . . . that unlike the world's gods, that the true God is not sitting up in heaven and demanding that we shape up and improve and give Him what He wants, but instead came to die for us and give us a new life . . . then you know the psalmist is right: ***This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes!***

And if the true God isn't so bad . . . and isn't a fool or insane after all . . . then maybe the life He gives isn't either. Maybe it's all those things the world keeps chasing after and trying and saying is normal and right and good . . . Maybe it's all those things that are foolish and insane . . . And then . . . with this new life and new way of thinking, with such a good and gracious and marvelous God . . . maybe there will be a few less wild grapes and a few more good grapes in your life. Ya think?

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.