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St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Parable of the Noble Master”

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.

The parable spoken by Jesus today is often entitled “The Parable of the Wicked Tenants,” or something to that effect. But I don’t think that’s quite right. For that title puts the focus on the tenants and their actions, instead of on the master and his actions, as it should be. For that is why Jesus told this parable and all parables. Parables are not to teach us about ourselves, or get us to focus on what we do - the Law does that, and quite well. Jesus tells parables to teach about the Gospel. About Himself and His Father. About mercy and grace. About what He has come to do.

And *that’s* the truly amazing thing in this parable, isn’t it? The actions of the tenants may be somewhat shocking or surprising . . . but, on the other hand, we could say, are comparable to the evil we see in our world everyday. In fact, the news is so full of evil that we, perhaps, grow numb to it. *Oh, another suicide car bombing, or another bloody coup . . .* I think I’ll change the channel and watch something else for a while. Sometimes, we even make a joke of horrendous evil, like when we say someone is “going postal.” And who knows what new kind of evil will be invented for tomorrow? And most sad of all, sometimes we even see such evil grabs for power and right and wealth in the church. Sinners live there, too.

So the tenants? Been there, done that. Yeah, that’s how our world is.

But the master of the vineyard, his actions are the truly shocking and surprising part of this parable. The arrangement was a common one. Wealthy landowners often lived far away from their lands and rented them out to workers who would take care of them for a percentage of the harvest. So sending his servants to collect his share was expected. No surprise there. But instead of keeping their agreement with the master, Jesus tells us, the tenants ***took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.***

Now at this point, the master has the right to contact the authorities, who at his request will send a heavily armed company of trained men to storm the vineyard, arrest the violent men who have mistreated his servants and bring them to justice. The abusing of his servants is an insult to him and he is honor bound to deal with

the matter. The question is: *what will he do?* How will he deal with his anger and with this injustice?

He sends more servants. That's not what we would expect! But *the master does not allow his enemies to dictate his response*. He does not use his power. He sends servants again, and the unspoken assumption here is that if he receives his share of the fruit this time, that will be the end of it. All will be *forgiven!* Yet the tenants do the same thing. Perhaps they interpret the master's action as weakness, and so they are emboldened.

Surely now enough is enough! The anger, the pain, the frustration, the rejection, the shame, the desire for justice will cause him to act! But again, instead of doing what he could do, and had every right to do, and should be expected to do . . . he does the most shocking thing of all: **he sends his son**. Alone and unarmed. Why? Our English translations say: **They will respect my son**. But perhaps a better rendering would be: *They will be shamed by my son*. The master hopes that the presence of his son will cause them to understand His indescribable goodness, patience, kindness, and nobility. He doesn't really expect *respect* from them - how could he? But he does hope to turn them with his grace. And again, the unspoken assumption here is that if he receives his share of the fruit this time too, all will be forgiven.

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.

Of course, you all know this is talking about Jesus. He is the Son sent into this world alone and unarmed and was crucified by . . . us. But I fear that just as we grow numb and used to the evil in the world around us, so too we perhaps grow numb and used to this incredible, indescribable goodness and love of God for us! That God sent His Son for you. *"Oh love, how deep, how broad how high, Beyond all thought and fantasy, That God, the Son of God, should take our mortal form for mortals' sake! For us by wickedness betrayed, for us, in crown of thorns arrayed, He bore the shameful cross and death; For us He gave His dying breath"* (LSB #544, vs. 1, 5).

Yeah, Jesus died on the cross for me. Yeah, my sins are forgiven. You preach about that every week, pastor. <Deep Breath> Think about this parable again . . . think about the fruit you produce in your life . . . think about how you act like the tenants. Yes, you. Throwing out or ignoring those parts of the Word of God you don't like. Even throwing Jesus out of parts of your life. For isn't that what you do when you have your "church life" and your "not-in-church life?" When you speak and act one way here and another way outside those doors? When you choose to sin and do what you want instead of what your Father in heaven wants? When you

take the incredible, indescribable goodness and love of God for you for granted?

So, *when therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."*

Yes, that's what we expect! There will be retribution. There will be justice.

But not before Jesus has one more surprise for us. Notice, He doesn't say: *Yes, yes, you're quit right. That's exactly what will happen.* He has a *different* answer to this question. ***Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes"?***

Or in other words, there is still hope for wicked tenants. **The rejection of the Son becomes not the trigger for retribution, but the cornerstone of forgiveness.** That you see in Jesus the incredible, indescribable goodness and love of your Father for you. That you see in Jesus your Father's call to you to leave your sin and rebellion and return to Him. And that yes, in Jesus, all is forgiven. All your sin, all your rebellion. No matter how deep and broad and high it is, the forgiveness and love of God is greater. Yes, in Jesus, all is forgiven.

For ***this was the Lord's doing.*** He didn't have to send His Son - He wanted to. And He knew what that sending of His Son into this world of sin meant - but He would use it, the rejection and death, for a ***marvelous*** good. That the death of the Son mean life for the world. *Which is what the master in the parable wanted, wasn't it?* Time after time, not wanting any tenant to die, but turn from their evil way and live (Ezekiel 33:11).

And so it is for you and me. Jesus is a stone of stumbling, that instead of going along in sin and rebellion, we hardened and miserable sinners fall and be broken, see and realize our sin and rebellion and its seriousness, and repent, that we may be raised with Jesus to a new life. **A new life** built on the cornerstone of our Father's incredible, indescribable love and forgiveness. **A new life** of faith, where the love, forgiveness, and mercy we receive produce the fruits of love, forgiveness, and mercy in our lives. **A new life** where sin and death and vengeance do not have the last word - but forgiveness and life and mercy does.

The alternative? To be crushed, now and forever. And for what? What in this world is worth that? What pleasure, what honor, what possessions, what friendship, what position, what power? No, Paul was right: ***I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.***

That's the amazing love of God for you! The amazing love given to you again, today, as Jesus comes with His forgiveness and life for you here in His Body and Blood. His Body and Blood once tossed out in the trash as rubbish, now given to you that you may have an inheritance far greater than anything on this earth. Is this not an incredible love, an indescribable gift, a marvelous mercy?

Yes, we should be amazed. Yes, 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.

(The title of this sermon and some of the insights and words contained in it from Kenneth Bailey, Through Peasant Eyes - a book I highly recommend!)