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Pentecost 19

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“He Wants to Forgive!”

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

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

You may remember a few weeks ago, we heard Peter ask Jesus, *Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?* (Matthew 18:21) And Jesus' answer was basically this: You forgive as often as he needs forgiveness. You forgive, and then you forgive some more. For that is what life in the kingdom of heaven is like. Forgiveness. Lavish, abundant, forgiveness and love that is far greater than you can imagine. Love and forgiveness given to you that changes you; that gives you a new and better life.

Well that's what we hear a little more about today in the next parable of Jesus: the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. Don't jump to the ending too quickly. I think we tend to do that. Jump right to the master throwing out those wicked tenants and **putting those wretches to a miserable death!** That's true and what will happen at the end. But if we jump right to that, we miss something . . . Namely this: *that is not what the master wants to do.* And he does everything in his power not to. He gives the tenants chance after chance after chance. Or another way to say that is that he does what Jesus told Peter to do: he forgives, forgives, and then forgives some more. They beat his servants, they stone his servants, they kill his servants, and what does he do? He doesn't just go in and wipe them out. He doesn't punish them. He sends more.

Absurd! Crazy, right? Psycho.

Why would you do such a thing? Well, if forgiveness is just something you **have** to do, you *wouldn't* do this! Your forgiveness would run out. But if forgiveness is something you **want** to do, something you *really want* for the other person . . . if forgiveness is not just something you do, but who you **are**, then this is what you do.

And then you do even more. *You send your own son.*

That's what Jesus is presenting to us today, teaching us. It's another parable answering Peter's question about forgiveness, but going a little farther than He did before. Jesus is actually reusing an old parable, first told by Isaiah, as we heard in

the Old Testament reading. It's really His parable, for the Old Testament are the words of Jesus also, words spoken by the prophets as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. But Jesus is refreshing it here; *contextualizing* it - that's a good modern way of putting it! Because there's a new context that wasn't there in Isaiah's day. This: the final part of the story had come. **The Son had come.**

And so we are being taught today that forgiveness isn't just what God does, it's **who He is**. And *in Him*, it is **who we are** as well.

Last week, we focused on the fact that life in the kingdom of heaven is life in a kingdom at war. War against the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature. And the weapons in this war are not earthly weapons, but heavenly ones: the Word and Sacraments. And they are our weapons because of what they do: because they give the forgiveness of sins. Which, admittedly, doesn't seem like much of a weapon. Forgiveness actually seems like the very opposite! It is not using the weapon of punishment and revenge! But that is the world's way of thinking and looking at things. From God's perspective, with God's eyes, forgiveness is the most powerful weapon we have. And the only one - the only one - that works against the powerful spiritual enemies we have.

The tenants in the vineyard are thinking with the world's thinking. They want to take the vineyard and make it their own. They've earned it! They've deserve it. So they devise a plan. A plan to steal it, really, from the owner. They will not only beat, stone, and kill the servants, but finally, get rid of the heir, the son, so that when the master dies, the vineyard will be given to the squatters. They want their own vineyard, their own kingdom, with their own king, with *them* in charge.

And you can do that. Build your own kingdom. Be your own king. Do whatever you want, whatever your sinful nature tells you to do. Don't forgive. Cut that person loose. Take for yourself. You can do that. Many do. And maybe you'll get away with it for a while. Think you've won. Gotten what you wanted. But the end of the story is coming. The day of reckoning.

But then comes the curveball in the parable . . . (And always look for the curveball to get to the parable's meaning!) instead of instilling fear and exacting retribution - which is what the master could have done! (And, maybe you would argue, what he *should* have done!) Instead, what did the master do? He sent his son. For he didn't want punishment and death for the wicked tenants. (Which is what they deserved, right?) He wanted something better for them. Even after all they did! He wanted a new life for them. A *better* life than the one they were living and going after.

And that's been our theme these past few weeks, and what you've heard me saying

over and over, as we've been considering the kingdom of heaven and life in it: there's a better way. The way not of taking but of receiving. The way not of death but of life. Not the old way of a sinful world, but the new life of love and forgiveness. The way of the master, that couldn't be more different than the way of the tenants. The master who sent his son.

Now, don't you think that after beating and stoning and killing all the servants he had already sent, that the master knew what was going to happen to his son? From an earthly, worldly perspective, maybe the master of the vineyard hoped for a different outcome; that things would be different with his son, crazily thinking that ***they will respect my son***. But God, our heavenly Father, who of course this parable is really about, isn't naive. He knew. And that's exactly why He sent His Son. To die. To die for wicked tenants. To die for you, so you wouldn't have to take and build your own little kingdom, but be gifted His. And live not only in a new and better kingdom, but live as new and better tenants in a new and better kingdom.

For even at our worst, God wants the best for us. When we are most sinful, God wants to be most forgiving. This is the love we just sang about. *O Love, how deep, how broad, how high, beyond all thought and fantasy* (LSB #544). That God would do this, BE this, for the likes of us. It's absurd! But it's true. And all this He did, as we sang *thirteen times* in that hymn, for us. For us the cross. For us the resurrection. For us a new life of forgiveness and love.

The new life given to the apostle Paul. If there was ever a wicked tenant in the vineyard, it was him! Oh, he thought he was doing the right thing, and doing it better and more zealously than anyone else, as we heard in the Epistle today. Arresting and killing Christian after Christian after Christian. Until Jesus knocked him off his high horse and showed him something completely different! For Jesus didn't just reveal himself to Paul, but revealed to him *who He is* - His unlimited, absurd, abundant, and lavish forgiveness. Jesus showed Paul a new and better way, what the kingdom of heaven is really like. And then, forgiving him, forgiving such a wicked tenant, gave him a new life to live in this kingdom. A kingdom far better than the one Paul was building for himself. And with that Paul turned from **being** a wicked tenant to one **sent** to wicked tenants to show them this new and better life. A life he was now living.

And maybe that's what you need, too, frankly. To be knocked off your high horse to stop living your old life. Maybe you're afraid not to. The world's not going to understand. The world's not going to have mercy. The world's going to take advantage of you! Maybe you don't know any other way. This is just the way life is! Life in this world. And maybe you get mad at God for knocking you down, for making you fall and breaking you, for ruining your carefully laid plans. *Why God? Why did*

you do that? What this trouble or that?

Because He wants to forgive you. *Always* because He wants to forgive you and give you a new life. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. A new and better life in a new and better kingdom. The life of Christ in His kingdom. Eternal life and dwelling in His presence forever.

So as Jesus went on to explain the parable, you can fall down now, fall down in repentance, ***broken to pieces***, and receive the healing and restoring forgiveness of Jesus that He *wants* to give you, that He *died* to give you! Or, on the last day, be crushed under Him and His justice. Be thrown out with the wicked tenants. Jesus doesn't want that. He wants you. He wants you with Him forever. Whoever you are, whatever you have done. He wants to wash you clean in Baptism, to continue to wash you in the absolution, feed you with His Body and Blood, and teach you about life in His kingdom through His Word. That's what He wants! So He put it here for you, to come and receive it. To come and receive His forgiveness, His life, His Son. ***Because the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, - His plan all along! - and it is marvelous in our eyes.***

A marvelous absurdity! Not the way the world works. And thank God for that! That He is different. Better. Merciful. Forgiving.

And note the change in the apostle Paul that this forgiveness wrought! *Before* he boasted in all he was and all he did. But now he now says (as we heard in the Epistle), Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, (why?) because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Because of the work of Jesus. And what is the work of Jesus? Forgiveness. The forgiveness of your sins. And with forgiveness, a new life. A life to live forever.

And so, Paul says, ***I press on to make it my own.*** *How?* Not with our own strength. Not with our own determination. Remember the weapons of the kingdom of heaven! We press on as we live in the Word, in our Baptism, in the Absolution, in the Body and Blood of Jesus. Because here is Jesus for you. Here are His gifts for you. Here is His life for you. A new and better life in a new and better kingdom. Which, admittedly, is a life that will look pretty foolish and absurd *for a while*, while we live in this world which is exactly the opposite, and thinks the opposite, and thinks you a rube for living the way you do as a Christian! But only for a while . . . Until all is revealed. Until Jesus comes again in glory, and takes you to glory. His glory, given to you. In His kingdom, given to you. With His life, given to you. Because that's who Jesus is and what He does. It's all for you. He is the Son who came and died for you, that you may live. That you live with Him, in Him, and like Him, a new life, in a new kingdom, starting now, and lasting forever.

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.