

October 4, 2020

Again with the Friut!

Shepherd's Grace Church

³³Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." ⁴²Jesus 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 amazing in our eyes'? ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet. (Matt. 21: 33-46)

⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have

already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3: 4-14)

So, Rochelle and I had an opportunity to celebrate an anniversary this week. Not that it matters except to show that I do remember the number, it was our fourteenth. It was very much the same as many of our other anniversaries and it was very much different.

One of the ways in which it was the same is in what is going on here and right now. It has become a tradition of mine that on the Sunday of our anniversary week, I wear the same suit that I wore when we got married. The suit I am wearing is that suit and I decided a long time ago that if I were going to make this tradition work, I would be able to wear this suit only once a year.

So, here it is, the same suit and even the same tie. The belt and shoes and socks and other stuff you cannot see are different and I decided to wear a different shirt this year because the shirt that I wore on that day in 2006 is starting to show a lot of ring around the collar.

As I said, so much of our anniversary was the same this year. It was, in very many ways, another year and another opportunity to share and celebrate life together. From the clothes I am wearing to the cards and flowers and candy there was little deviation. Cards and flowers and candy have become a part of the start to our anniversary celebration and we try to surprise each other with them and I do enjoy that. I especially enjoy the candy!

One of the other things I enjoy is the wording on the card. Since our first anniversary together, I have always written in my card, "I am still glad you said yes!" Rochelle has always written "I am still glad you asked!" Neither of those phrases changed this year and I am sure glad they didn't because while some of the anniversary we celebrated was the same this year, the year was very different. I know many of you have experienced different years also.

While we are all aware of the differences of the year, it is important to stop and think sometimes of the differences of the days. One day is not always just like another and even celebration days are not always just like other celebration days. While there were many similarities to our anniversary this year, there was one major difference that made this year's celebration different from any other. James was here.

Having a two year old to care for changes everything in your life! I am sure I do not have to tell you moms of toddlers that, but I had to learn that lesson. I told Ross and Chris last night at the steak fry that they were way too old to take on this kind of job! There is just no rest! Two year olds, at least this one have a motor that just doesn't quit! James went non-stop through the work I and to do and through the park and the lake and the ducks and all that happened before noon! The rest of the afternoon was a blur and was made up on the fly because I thought sure what I planned would get us through the day! His presence changed everything for us on that day!

Thankfully, late in the afternoon, we got to go to Udall and watch Grandma coach volleyball. More thankfully, Nana and Papa went with us. After the game, the normal returned...at least, somewhat. Rochelle and I still got to go out for dinner, but instead of just the two of us, it was the five of us and after that, and after I got James settled down I fell into bed and my last waking thought was, "Oh my goodness, I get to do all of this again tomorrow!"

Our anniversary was the same this year, but it was also very, very different. Many of the celebrations we have in life, many of the repeating events we have in life are built on the sameness. They are built on traditions. They are built on memories. These repeatable occurrences remind us of the emotions we feel and invoke the happiness of the original occasion. In a sense, they are the truth of our celebration. Truth, according to Josh McDowell is that which is authentic to the original. In repeating the traditions, we repeat the truth, the affirmation of the day.

There is also another truth to these anniversary days. That truth is that while we repeat intentionally so many things, we also acknowledge the change that has taken place in our lives. This year, for Rochelle and me, that change was in the presence of a grand-son. Certainly, he is a blessing in our lives but that blessing changes everything. It enhances, it magnifies, and it intensifies the totality of the day!

I believe this recognition of sameness and change invites us in to the parable Jesus invites us to hear this morning. "In the Beginning," when God creates the heavens and the earth he builds a world that according to Job is defined by boundaries. "Thus far shall the oceans go and no further." These boundaries are defined for the ability of all creation to take place. Fish live in the waters. Dry land animals live on dry land.

God prepared the environment for all of creation to give the very best outcome for each thing that God created. When he called out of creation a people to tell the story of their relationship with Him, he set them apart.

So, as we hear the parable this morning, we can confidently take from it that the one who built the vineyard is God. This stands in opposition to the one who hired laborers last week (Matt. 20) who manipulated and controlled every action. God does not hold us in sway by force and control. No, God reveals Godself to us as he does this morning, as one who prepares everything and then gives us the freedom to choose how we are going to exist inside of God's creation.

The vineyard God builds is the land promised to God's chosen people, Israel. He leases that vineyard to the people. He does not give it to them. They have freedom to use it but it still belongs to God. On the date of their receiving this land, there is an understanding that they are to produce fruit in the vineyard. There is further understanding that they are to give the produce of that fruit to the Lord.

The Lord of the vineyard leaves them to their work. After they have been instructed by the prophets about how the work is to be done and what the rules of production are, they work.

Today, we meet up with them after 400 years of the landowner's silence. We call this time the silent years where no prophetic voice was heard. We discover that they have forgotten their original agreement with him perhaps because he has seemed so absent for such a long time or because others have come in and usurped his message or because they liked the power they were able to assimilate while he was gone.

At any rate, the bill comes due but the tenants refuse to pay. They beat and torture and kill the slaves that are sent. In terms of the parable, those disregarded the first time are the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, prophets like Isaiah who, at the end of the thirty ninth chapter tells the king of Israel that the destruction of the nation will not occur in his lifetime. (You should correctly read here that the destruction will occur but just not now)

After a time, still more slaves come. This time more than the last. These are still more prophets along with believers who recognize that it is God's world and that we are just here as tenants on the land of the Lord! They meet with the same fate.

I would point out here that it is not easy for people to stand up to power. The tenants, the leaders of the Jews have entrenched themselves in the system and have reworked the system to the point where they are in power and those who follow them will keep the power. This systemic system of power makes it impossible for others to introduce new ideas or even challenge the old ones.

It creates in the real world, an environment where the wealthy are absolutely accepted as the right. In this world, less than one percent of the population controls over ninety five percent of the wealth. The wealthy are unbelievably rich and the others are poor beyond our imagination. Perhaps it is important to examine this situation in light of our current circumstances in the United States. Today, approximately 2 Percent of the population of our nation controls over ninety five percent of the wealth of our nation. It is difficult for us to imagine that the balance of the wealth is divided among the other ninety eight percent of the population.

It is difficult to imagine because we live in a country where we represent about twenty percent of the world's population but we control well in excess of seventy five percent of the world's wealth. Let's face it...there is a lot of wealth in our nation so our poor do not look like the poor in other places but the disparity of wealth continues to widen!

The people in the vineyard knew that the only way they could keep their wealth was to keep their power. They treated the slaves as they did because the slaves were a threat. The owner, God, was demanding what they promised, the produce from the vineyard.

Now, if we could step away from such a mundane topic and wealth for just a minute, we could remember that the produce, the fruit from the vineyard was never riches. The vineyard owner already owned all the wealth. What he wanted was the produce. What he expected from the tenants was that they share with everyone his message of benevolence and hope so that all could work together for the coming of the owner.

Instead, the tenants badly belittled the conditions of the vineyard. They created rules for all people to follow. You know what I am talking about. The owner left many rules but they interpreted the rules to create many more. They created additional rules about Sabbath, about adultery, about honoring father and mother, about coveting, about relationship with neighbors. In the end, the rules became so restrictive that the produce, the people who came to learn from the tenants were so confused they could not accurately tell what they were supposed to follow and what was insignificant!

Then along came the son. The tenants were afraid of the son, more so than they were afraid of the slaves. The son talked to the ones who were confused. He sought them out because they were like sheep without a shepherd. (John 10) The listened to him because he taught not as the tenants but as one with wisdom and authority. (Luke 4) He simplified the rules for them so they could understand.

He condensed the rules from 613 that the prophets had given and all the extraneous addendums to them given by the scribes and pharisees to two rules.

1. Love God
2. Love Neighbor

These were rules they could remember and keep straight. Once more they felt like the children of Moses and Joshua who, when they crossed over in to the vineyard God had given them could keep the words of God in their mouths and on their hearts and could meditate upon them day and night and never let them depart from their lips. (Deut. 6, Josh. 1) These were words they could teach to their children and expect their children to remember. With these words, they could be fruitful and multiply.

That knowledge produced fear in the hearts of the tenants. The produce was being taken from them so they said, "Look, this is the son. Let us kill him and throw him out of the vineyard and steal his inheritance!"

Of course, we know that is exactly what they did and they did it unwittingly. The Pharisees knew of Messiah, the Son. They knew he was coming and they denied him. Ironically, by denying him and insulting him and slapping him, they fulfilled the prophesy which had to be fulfilled. They touched his face and by doing so, allowed that he be the one identified by God!(John 19) By touching him as religious leaders, they were fulfilling one of those commandments in the Hebrew Bible.

Jesus asked them, what do you think the owner of the vineyard will do to those who killed his son. In asking this question, he caused the Pharisees to realize he was talking about them. They had no choice but to acknowledge what would happen to the ones who killed the son. They also would be killed and replaced by other tenants, ones who would create produce for the owner.

Those to whom the vineyard was given, those to whom the keys to the kingdom were entrusted were of course those who recognized the Son for who he was. "He was the only Son of the Father, filled with every Grace and He gave to them the power to become children of God." (John 1, 11-14)

They learned what it meant to love God! They learned the truth of worship from the Holy Spirit and in worship they connected with the whole meaning of Grace. They came in time to know that there was nothing they could do to hasten the kingdom. All they could do was receive God's amazing grace and share the good news of Grace with others. The awesomeness of God's love was too immense to contain in their hearts so it naturally spilled over into their

lives. They did not let it depart from their lips but rather, they taught their children. They produced fruit upon fruit.

They learned to love neighbor. They learned that there was no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. They learned instead that all were equal in God's eyes and they loved equally and without reservation. They passed this tradition down through the centuries and they trusted that those to whom they passed it would continue to work for the equality and freedom of all people.

Today, we receive this tradition. Some may want to say, can we not rest on the laurels of what has been done. We live in the wealthiest nation ever established on the face of the earth and even our poor have more than the poor in other nations. They say we have freed slaves and there are no longer people enslaved by others. They say our women have a say in our society and in our world. Surely now we can rest!

The scripture reminds us that there is no rest from generation to generation. Each generation must work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. (Phil. 2: 11) Each generation must take up the mantle of loving neighbor and of teaching the love of neighbor. We must make our children aware that we stand on the shoulders of giants who have done great things, but we have done nothing!

We do not get to claim credit for how far we have come. We must go farther still. We must continue to work in the vineyard and produce fruit for the owner so that we can give Him the praise and the honor and the glory in all things. We must recognize that it is still only in Him that we live and move and have our being.

Others rejected the son and his lessons. "The stone that the builders rejected has become our cornerstone. It is a thing the Lord has done and it is marvelous to behold." (Ps. 118) We have chosen to build on his lessons. It is upon his teaching, his sacrifice and his love that we have built our church!

Each generation and each person in each generation must learn and remember that we have done nothing. Those who have gone before us were killed and abused for their faith. We have done nothing. We have instead received Grace after Grace from the one who loved us enough to lay down His life for us! It is in Him that we continue to work.

He has made it simple. We are to Love God and Love Neighbor. All the other laws and commandments hang on these two things. These two alone produce the fruit the owner wants to receive. I know...it is again with the fruit but it is

such good fruit! It is fruit worthy of planting and digging and caring for. It is the fruit which will continue to produce fruit...sometimes ten fold, sometimes thirty fold and sometimes a hundred. This is the fruit we are and the fruit our children will become. Amen!