

Lectionary 27 Year A 2020
October 4, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We've spent several weeks now hearing parables from the Gospel of Matthew, but in the last couple weeks, the tone has changed a bit. Jesus is now speaking to the Pharisees, chief priests, and scribes as he teaches through parables. Many of Jesus' parables up until this point have been reflections on the Kingdom of God and provided images to help define God's relationship with God's people. Now, Jesus has shifted the focus of his parables to talk about the Pharisees.

Along with this shift in focus, we see something else as well. This parable, as well as the one we heard last week, ends with a question. Jesus sets up the entire story without an ending. Instead, he expects the chief priests and Pharisees to make some connections on their own. Jesus asks them, "Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

But before they make any connections, the chief priests and Pharisees decide that the tenants should get what they deserve. They tell Jesus, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time." They want to see the tenants in the parable punished for their actions, punished for their greed and murder. The chief priests and Pharisees live in a society that believes people get what they deserve.

But Jesus neither confirms or contradicts their answer, instead quoting Psalm 118, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

Through these words and a little more explanation from Jesus, it begins to dawn on the chief priests and Pharisees that Jesus is talking about them. Jesus is suggesting that they are like the violent tenants in the parable. Had they rejected and killed the slaves and sons of the landowner? Is Jesus blaming them for the rejection of Israel's prophets? Without realizing it, the chief priests and Pharisees have named the punishment for their own behavior. And the punishment is quite harsh.

This parable along with Jesus' comments points out that the chief priests and Pharisees have rejected John the Baptist and other prophets, and ultimately, they will reject God's only Son. We all know where this story is leading. We're in the 21st chapter of Matthew this week. Jesus has just made his final entry into Jerusalem. In just a few days, he will celebrate the last supper with his disciples, and then be arrested and crucified. The rejection by the Pharisees and religious leaders, along with the power of the Roman authorities, ultimately leads to Jesus' death.

But their rejection wasn't just some isolated event that happened over 2,000 years ago. Although we hate to admit it, we reject Jesus too. Jesus was rejected by those he came to save 2,000 years ago, but he is still rejected by those he came to save today, too. We confess each week that we are sinners in need of redeeming. Jesus hung on the cross because of our sinfulness too. Our sinfulness is the reason we worship on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday each year, recognizing our participation in the brokenness of this world, and our own inability to see Jesus standing before us. This parable speaks to us and our sinfulness too, just like it did for the chief priests and Pharisees.

We know our sinfulness: we have neglected the poor, dismissed the outcast, ignored the immigrant and refugee. We have hurt others for our own selfish gain. We seek to accuse rather than understand. We remain indifferent in the face of racism, choosing to ignore the systems that benefit us and destroy others. We pick and choose which teachings of Jesus we'd like to follow,

and those we prefer to ignore. We judge the sins of others while refusing to see our own sin. We sing praises and shout, “Hosanna!” as Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but then days later we shout, “Crucify him!” as part of the angry crowd that condemns Jesus to death. These and many others are the ways that we have done our part in rejecting Jesus our Lord.

And so, the Pharisees and chief priests have laid out the punishment that we deserve: “Put those wretches to a miserable death.”

But we must remember, this punishment comes from the Pharisees. Jesus does not call for this punishment. Jesus didn’t finish his parable. Jesus simply offers a reflection on the situation, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” The one whom the chief priests, the Pharisees, and we have rejected has become the cornerstone of our faith. Christ is the one that is our foundation, even though we have turned away, even though we have rejected his teachings, even though we have sent him to the cross.

Yet, despite our failings, and the failings of the chief priests and Pharisees, Jesus still came to earth, and still comes to those that he knows will reject him. This is the promise of the gospel. Jesus comes to us, even when we don’t deserve it, even when we choose to reject him. Jesus willingly gave himself over to the authorities and journeyed to the cross for us and for all those like us—sinful wretches that we are. Despite our rejection, despite our failings, and judgments, and selfishness, and greed—despite everything we’ve done, and despite ourselves, Jesus comes to us. And he comes for us. And he remains with us.

Jesus leaves this parable unfinished for now, but it is ultimately finished when Jesus bursts out of the tomb of death on that Easter morning. Jesus finishes this parable when he rises from the grave. The answer to the question that Jesus asks, “When the own of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” is found in Christ’s resurrection. The answer to Jesus’ question is grace upon grace for all who have rejected him. When God, the owner of the vineyard comes, what will God do to us? God brings us grace. God brings us forgiveness. God brings us mercy. God brings us love. And God brings us new life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Today’s sermon is based on one shared by Rev. Kellan Day.