

## "Unfaithful Stewardship in the Vineyard"

Matthew 21:33-46

At this point in Matthew's gospel, we are in the midst of Holy Week. Jesus has triumphantly ridden into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, has cleansed the temple of the money changers, and now on Tuesday is having a relatively quiet time before the beginning of the passion on Maundy Thursday. During these middle days of Holy Week, Jesus tells one parable of judgment after another while the Judean authorities respond with baited questions, trying their best to catch him in a chargeable offense.

Last weekend, many of us were blessed to hear and watch Michael Reardon present the Gospel of John. We watched the ruling class moving to do Jesus in. Between the fear that Jesus will upset their political balancing act with Rome and the resentment they feel at his attacks upon themselves, the rulers decide it's time for a verbal standoff. They challenge Jesus.

Jesus responds with the parable of the two sons in which the rulers judge themselves to be the unfaithful second son. Matthew 21:28-32 . . . <sup>28</sup>What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup>He answered, 'I will not; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup>Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him." Jesus is embarrassing them or better, they are embarrassing themselves in their own temple in

Jerusalem, their Holy City, where thousands of faithful Jews have gathered to celebrate the Passover Festival. Jesus is on a roll, as he immediately follows the Parable of the Two Sons with this parable of "unfaithful stewardship in the vineyard."

Jesus says, "Hear 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."

Once again Jesus echoes Isaiah's prophecy from the O.T. Isaiah 5:1-2; "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes but it yielded wild grapes."

Isaiah is referring to the nation of Israel as God's vineyard that He delivered from slavery in Egypt to the fertile, promised land. He sent judges, kings, and prophets to watch over the nation, but it would not listen and turned away from God. The grapes became wild and the nation lost its greatness being trampled under the feet of the Babylonians and the Assyrians.

Jesus uses this same image of the vineyard to describe the first century situation in Israel. Once again, Israel is the vineyard that God has leased out to the tenants now in charge, namely, the Judean authorities who are now face to face with Jesus in the Jerusalem temple, and whose defective stewardship Jesus is now confronting.

Look at the text. Look at the next 3 verses, verses 34-36. "When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way."

Jesus is very obviously referring to the Old Testament prophets who were beaten, stoned, and sometimes killed for preaching a message people did not want to hear. God's messengers then were no more acceptable to the authorities than Jesus is now. All the prophets of old could do was to speak the truth and to thereby prepare the way for the coming of God's Son.

With this introduction to the parable Jesus is once again setting up his listeners, the people in power, to condemn themselves.

Now the prophetic meat of the parable on Tuesday of Holy Week in the Jerusalem temple. What happens to the landowner's son will happen to Jesus three days later on crucifixion Friday.

Matthew 21:37-39 . . . Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

The son is just one more interference with their plans to take control of the vineyard and to become the landowners. There is no good reason why the tenants should alter their unfaithful stewardship now, just because the landowner has sent his son. We will simply kill anyone and eliminate anything that gets in our way in becoming the landowners.

In the same way, there is no good reason for Jesus to hope that the authorities he is face to face with in the temple will alter their unbelief. Jesus knows they simply consider him to be another dangerous nuisance to be eliminated.

In the same way, there is no good reason for us, today, in 2011, to listen to these gospel words from scripture or to listen to God's messengers today. After all, it's been almost 2,000

years and Jesus still hasn't returned. The landowner must have forgotten about this vineyard we call earth, we call the United States, we call Ohio, we call Cleveland, we call Divinity, we call family. This vineyard is all of our own doing and therefore it is ours to claim. Any gospel word or person that suggests otherwise will simply be ignored.

The reason the tenants give for their plan to kill the landowner's son is absurd: there is no real chance that murdering the heir of the vineyard will result in their inheriting it, especially since the landowner is still alive, well, and breathing down their necks at the end of the parable. The only way their reasoning could make sense is if they assumed the landowner was so far away, that they could live out the time of their stewardship before the judgment descended upon them.

The reason for the Judean authorities to murder Jesus is equally absurd. The authorities facing Jesus in the temple assume that the judgment is a long way in the future. And they further assume that when it does come, it will be easily recognized as Israel becomes the top dog in the world featuring a Messiah who will himself be recognizable as a nose punching interventionist.

They are not at all prepared for the mild arrival of this messianic pretender named Jesus whose saving action is so aggravating to them and so against their expectations that they have to murder him.

We are no different today when we ignore God's word and his messengers. We, too, become the unfaithful stewards of the vineyard when we believe the vineyard is ours to do with as we wish. When we refuse to recognize the real landowner, or when we simply ignore the landowner and his messengers, then we bring judgment upon ourselves.

We say we have earned everything we have. We are good athletes because we have lifted weights and spent hours on the practice field. **Our** children are smart and healthy because we are wonderful parents. We have plentiful food because we are the best farmers who know how to get the most out of our land. We have good jobs because we went to school and bettered ourselves. Everything is **ours**. Greed rules from Wall Street to Main Street. If there is a God who owns the earth and who owns us, then he's way out there somewhere and could care less about what's going on here. The vineyard is **ours**. Anyone or anything that suggests otherwise we will ignore or eliminate.

Those who did not participate in Miracle Sunday are primarily those of us who worship on Christmas and Easter, if then. When we don't hear God's Word regularly its much easier to believe what we have is ours and we don't want to be reminded of the landowner who expects his share of the harvest. After all, what's that landowner ever done for me? He's a nuisance that keeps sending me these messages and messengers I don't want to hear or see!

Jesus ends the parable with this question in verse 40. "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

Verse 41. They 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."

The setup, you see, has worked perfectly. Jesus has gotten them to say exactly what he would have said himself. The stewardship of the vineyard, the stewardship of the mystery of salvation will be given to others who will be faithful stewards.

The faithful stewards will do the one thing necessary. They will accept, rather than reject the Son of God. The faithful stewards will accept Jesus as the cornerstone of their salvation; the

cornerstone that saves the world by his passion, death, and resurrection.

Finally, Jesus prophetically spells out the end result of the authorities' faithless stewardship of the vineyard.

Verses 42-44, 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 amazing in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

His Messiahship is a great stone in the world's way. We want the vineyard to be ours. We want to be in control. We want to be God. The world trips over the cornerstone in unbelief. We are filled with fear when we realize Jesus is talking about us as being the unfaithful stewards of the vineyard. How do we respond to Jesus' parables?

Verses 45-46. "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet. "

They were right. Jesus was against them. And he is against the world, too. He stands in judgment against everyone who will not accept his acceptance of the world by faith alone. As long as we spend our time, energy and money trying to justify ourselves and trying to justify our ownership of the vineyard, we will be threatened by and fearful of Jesus' giving us the gift of salvation. We don't want God's grace; we want the law that will keep us in power.

Ultimately, though, we can't stop the power of the Son of the landowner. Jesus died for the sins of those who killed him - even for the sins of we who continue to believe the vineyard

is ours and not his. All Jesus ever wanted was for us to believe - to become faithful stewards of **His** vineyard, **His** family, **His** church, **His** creation - to give us His peace.

Look with me on the announcement sheet under “Walk with Jesus” An important part of this daily walk with Jesus is how you use the money God has entrusted to you. This is such an important part of the walk that Jesus talked with his first disciples more about money and possessions than about any other topic, except for the kingdom of God itself. Since money was so important on Jesus’ walk, it needs to be an important part of our walk with Jesus.

Look into yourself. Celebrate the ways you are living for others, with family and friends, at school, at work, with people you like and people you don't. Look into your life. Notice how you use your time and money, your energy, and your skills in ways that serve others. You will see evidence of Christian living because God gives you direction. It's a principle - we Christians live for others in God's vineyard, not our vineyard!

We don't have to look for new guidelines in each situation. The direction of our lives is always love flowing from God, through us, to others. It's the way Christ shapes us in His vineyard. We are His creation living in His creation.

Celebrate:

- God at work in you for others.
- God at work in people around you, for others.
- God at work in our congregation, for others.

Let *the word of Christ* dwell in you richly (Colossians 3:16a).

#689 – Praise and Thanksgiving.