

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Last Sunday, we considered the Parable of the Prodigal Son; this Sunday, it's the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. You might get the impression that these two parables were told in quick succession, but that's not right. Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem when He told the former; He had made His triumphant entrance on Palm Sunday when He told the latter. Jesus was in Jerusalem. It was for Him, if you will, Holy Week. Ours begins in a week, we pray back in church.

That's where Jesus went when He entered Jerusalem — to church, that is, to the temple. The first thing He did in the temple was *“to drive out those who sold”* there, turning His Father's *“house of prayer”* into *“a den of robbers”* (Luke 19:45). And over the next several days, Jesus went there each day to teach.

And the people loved it! They were *“hanging on his words.”* God grant that our attitude may be the same. The *“chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people,”* however, didn't love it. They challenged Jesus' authority and sought to destroy Him (Luke 20:1-2, 8; 19:47).

If, as I suggested last Sunday, that the Parable of the Prodigal Son was a last ditch effort by Jesus to invite the Pharisees and scribes to recline at table with Him at the eternal feast, then Jesus' encounter with them this time and the parable He told surely indicates that the invitation was declined. Their relationship, never really friendly, had become adversarial. Therefore, entering into Jerusalem, Jesus would acknowledge their rejection and would weep over their stiff-necked refusal: *“Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes”* (Luke 19:42).

Jesus then turned back to the people and taught them the parable that's before us today. *“A man planted a vineyard,”* Jesus began. The figure of a vineyard would have been familiar to the people, especially the religious leaders. They surely knew the Lord's song of the vineyard recorded by the prophet Isaiah: *“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; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes”* (Is. 5:1-2). I hope these words sound familiar to you. We'll hear them again in the Reproaches on Good Friday.

Isaiah tells us what the vineyard is: *“For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry”* (Is. 5:7).

In Jesus' parable, the man let out the vineyard, that is, he rented it to tenants, expecting them to pay their rent. At the proper time, the man sent servants to

receive the rent payment — in this case, “*some of the fruit of the vineyard*” — but the tenants beat up one servant, treated shamefully another, and wounded still another and cast him out. How unjust! The servants all left empty-handed ... an outcry!

Surely, these tenant farmers represent the religious authorities, past and present, who did as Jesus had lamented earlier: they “[*killed*] *the prophets and [stoned] those who [were] sent*” to them (Luke 13:34). History bears witness to it. Israel did mistreat the prophets God had sent to her, and the final one, John the Baptist, had been thrown in prison and eventually lost his head.

The owner of the vineyard asked himself, “*What shall I do?*” The chief priests and scribes surely were drawn again to the song in Isaiah: “*What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it*” (Is. 5:4)? The owner of the vineyard didn’t hesitate; he didn’t really debate within himself. He knew what he was going to do; he answered his own question: “*I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.*” And the son went ... “most willingly” (LSB438:3).

How reckless that seems to us ... almost beyond all reason! Truly, a love unknown, for we know that this owner represents the Lord Himself, as Isaiah says, “*the vineyard [belongs to] the LORD of hosts*” (Is. 5:7). That makes the owner’s son, the One being sent to the slaughter, God’s only Son, our Lord Jesus. “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:16-17).

What the tenants did would be shocking to us if the story of Jesus were not so well known. The tenants rejected the son, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him; just as the Jews, prompted by their leaders, were about to do to Jesus ... as we know they did. Jesus was the One “*despised and rejected by men*” (Is. 53:3). He was the One cast out of the city gates. He was the One “*led to the slaughter,*” lifted up on a cross (Is. 53:7; John 3:14-15), “*pour[ing] out his soul to death*” (Is. 53:12). All this for us — that’s the love unknown. “*For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Rom. 5:7-8).

The tenants thought that in this way they would receive the inheritance. How foolish! “[*The owner*] *will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.*” Rejection of the Son means destruction.

The people understood the parable and exclaimed: “*Surely not,*” in the ESV. “*May it never happen*” in other versions; “*may it never be.*” But Jesus points them to the Old Testament prophecy in Psalm 118. It’s a different figure — “*The stone that*

*the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*” — but the result is the same. Rejection of this stone means destruction ... broken to pieces, crushed.

Those who reject the Son — who reject the stone — are destroyed, but the vineyard is not. It is given to others. Jesus is talking about the church here. The Son, rejected, cast out, killed, is He upon whom the church is built. The stone rejected by the builders — Jesus — is the cornerstone upon which the church is built. And it will abide forever (Augsburg Confession, VII:1) — *“the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”* (Matt. 16:18).

What encouragement that is for us, with enemies of Christ all around us, with people who seek to silence us or destroy us — even some in our own government and in other countries. We have this comforting promise: they shall not prevail against Christ’s church ... against us, for we are now the tenants in this vineyard; a stewardship has been given to us. God grant that we may be faithful to our callings, that our faith may yield the good grapes of righteousness and justice.

The *“scribes and the chief priests”* understood the parable, too. They *“perceived that [Jesus] had told this parable against them.”* They understood the parable but were not moved to repent of their wickedness. They had hardened their hearts to the warning. They would do as the wicked tenants of the parable did. They would kill the Son, though they wouldn’t do the dirty deed themselves. They would twist Jesus’ words and *“deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor”* with their false accusations. Pontius Pilate and his Roman soldiers would do the rest. Pilate would condemn an innocent man to death. His soldiers would mock and scourge Jesus and ultimately nail Him to the tree of the cross until He died.

The earth would tremble at His dying and rocks would be split, but not the Cornerstone. As our LSUS theme verse has it: *“He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God”* (Ps. 62:6-7). Jesus remains the solid foundation of His Church to this day; church is where we encounter Him. And Jesus is the source of the fruit of His vineyard; here is where His grace is given and we are encouraged to *“bear[] much fruit”* (John 15:5).

O Lord, keep us in Your Church, and grow us by Your grace into ever more fruitful branches of Your Vine. Build us together into the household of God on Christ, the solid Rock — on Christ, the stone rejected, Christ the cornerstone.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.