**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“Parable of the Wicked Tenants”**

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Mt. 21:33-46

This parable tells us certain things about God. First, it tells us God is generous. The master of the house gives the vineyard everything needed to produce fruit. He purchases the land, pays the taxes. He pays the cost for the grape vines and the wages of the tenants. There’s the fence to keep out wild animals, and the wine press. There’s also the watchman’s tower . . . certainly not manned year-round, but only when the fruit was ripe for picking. The tower also served as a place to store the wine, and as lodging for the tenants.

It takes about four years for a newly planted vineyard before it begins to produce. So, for four years, there are hefty numbers in the expense column, and all sorts of zeros in the income column.

Similarly, God has certainly been generous to us. He’s given us daily bread, which has to do with the needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, money, the rule of law, peace, health, good friends and neighbors, a faithful spouse. God is generous to us. We have all we need to produce fruit.

Second, God is also trusting, like the master of the house who entrusts his precious vineyard completely to the care of the tenants. Similarly, God gives us great responsibilities long before we may even be ready for them. He essentially handed to mankind His treasured creation and said, “I give you dominion over all this. Keep it. Protect it. Be good stewards of it and pass it on to future generations in good order.”

Similarly, God entrusts many of us with a spouse to love and care for and children too, whether we’ll raise the children to know and love the Lord, or raise them to be mostly ignorant of Him and what He has done for us.

He entrusts us with work and income. The median household income in Watertown is about $52,000. So, over the next twenty years the average household in Watertown will be responsible for over a million dollars. God will not breathe down our necks or dictate how we use it but gives us freedom and trusts us to be good stewards, good tenants.

1) God is generous. 2) God is trusting. Third, God is patient. In the parable, not once or twice but on multiple occasions the master of the house gives the tenants opportunities to repent and give him his fruit. Nothing unreasonable here: it’s his vineyard and his fruit. He treats them with the courtesy and patience they little deserve. God does the same with us. 2 Peter 3, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

Fourth, God is just. These tenants are making some big and faulty assumptions about the master. They are the same assumptions many make about God. Perhaps they think He’s too far away to really know what’s going on, or too far away to act. Maybe they think the master of the house has died, or that God is dead. Maybe they think He’s impotent. Maybe they mistake His physical absence for indifference. Maybe they mistake His patience for apathy or forgetfulness. Maybe they think God is a softy and will throw a blind eye toward their horrendous behavior. Maybe they think He’s too busy or distracted by bigger problems, like the war in Ukraine, to be concerned about what we’re up to in Watertown. Often, people, like these tenants, feel a sense of entitlement. After all, they’ve worked hard, and their hard work has paid off. They feel self-made, self-sufficient. They feel they *earned* it and don’t owe *anyone anything.* The delusions of man can be staggering, but it will all come crashing down on the Last Day, because God is just.

It may at times seem that God is absent. But God has not abandoned us or slackened His expectations. Some may harden their hearts against Him, some take advantage of His generosity and patience, but sooner or later there comes a day of reckoning, because God is just.

In the parable, Jesus asks those religious authorities opposing Him, “When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and will let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.” They just pronounced their own sentence! Jesus says to them, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.” Jewish rejection of Jesus results in the Gentiles’ inclusion in the Kingdom. That’s us. As Gentiles, we were not the people of God, but now, by God’s grace, we are the people of God.

However, we should take care. God is generous and long-suffering, but we should not presume His patience will go on forever. There are always others to whom God can entrust His precious vineyard. The gravitational center of Christendom is already moving south and east, not to Florida and Georgia, but out of North America and Northern Europe to Africa and Asia, where the Word is being received with eagerness.

God is generous, trusting, patient, and just, often in ways that are not our ways. The most unrealistic part of a parable is usually the part that Jesus wants us to remember. And the most unrealistic part of this parable is the fact that this landowner keeps sending servants, one wave after another, hoping for a change of heart from the tenants. But the servants hobble back with cracked ribs, broken noses, and dislocated shoulders, or they don’t come back at all because they’re dead. Of course, this points to God’s prophets who were often ignored, abused, or killed. But God keeps sending them, not because He views their lives as cheap, but because He so treasures the vineyard, His people. He counts them worthy of sacrifice.

The point at which a parable becomes most improbable is also the point to really lean in and pay attention. A real landowner would see to it that there would be swift and decisive justice. But instead, this landowner sends his son. With that, the parable has reached its breaking point. No ordinary master would ever do this, and yet this is what our God has done for us. Nothing like it has ever happened before, and so an unrealistic parable must be used to present it.

It’s not naivety that prompts the Father to send His Son. It’s love. God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son. So, He does not descend on us like a thunderbolt to “put those wretches to a miserable death.” He descends as a baby, weak and vulnerable, to one day Himself as a wretched man on a cross be put to a miserable death. Jesus did not come to retaliate. He came to save.

In the hymn, “A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth” in verse 2, the Father sends forth His Son by saying, “The wrath and stripes are hard to bear, But by Your passion they will share The fruit of Your salvation.’” In verse 3, the Son responds: “Yes, Father, yes, most willingly I’ll bear what You command Me . . . I’ll do what You have asked Me.”

Isaiah 53 says, “Like a lamb that is led to slaughter . . . so He opened not His mouth”, and this, not just against His persecutors, but also not against the bidding and guiding of His Father. Remember? Jesus prayed in the Garden: “Father, not My will be done, but Yours.”

As Jesus is telling this parable, He’s looking at the religious authorities, and says, “They took the son and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.” You know what He’s doing here? He is telling His murderers exactly what they are even now planning to do to Him and are on the verge of doing. What they have conjured in secret, Jesus tells them openly to their faces. He knows exactly how this is going to unfold. They will make Him carry a cross *outside* the walls of Jerusalem where they will crucify Him.

Yet, it is through the cross where Christ is killed for the sin and rebellion of all the world. God is just, and this is God’s justice at work. He cannot just wink at sin; it must be accounted for. On the cross, Jesus is the propitiation for the sin of the world. This includes those religious authorities who were orchestrating His death, and it includes you and me, for our forgiveness. This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous.

Jesus knew the stakes. The Son knew His life was hanging in the balance. He knew what happened to the previous servants. This Servant also comes willing to suffer. Jesus came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God (Jn. 1:11).

God is generous, trusting, patient and just. The Kingdom and gracious reign of God will not be thwarted. It will be accomplished in the Son and given to a people producing its fruit. Amen.