

The Grapes
Matthew 21:33-46

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

Well here we are again with another parable from Jesus talking about the vineyard. If you have been in church for that last two weeks and remember the gospel readings, then you would have notice that this is the third time in a row. It is amazing that within two chapters Jesus uses a vineyard to draw his listeners into the story three times. Grapes are wonderful. They are like the perfect snack food. They come in their own wrappers, bunched together in nice little handfuls. Once you clean them you can hold them in a bowl and pop them in your mouth, one at a time or a whole bunch at once. Some people take grapes that they buy or grow and make them into wine or grape juice. Then of course there are grapes that are left to make raisins with all their nutritional potential. Grapes are a pretty good food.

It is no wonder that the grape plant was seen as a great blessing by the people of Israel, and ultimately used as a national symbol. After 400 years of captivity, and 40 years of wondering in the dessert, when God's people were about to cross the Jordan into the promised Land, a couple of scouts reported back their first view of the promised land. It was noted as a land filled with crops and vineyards. With grape clusters so large that it took two men to carry them. You could almost hear the conversation when they got back, "How big did you say those grapes were?" "They were THIS BIG!" And the hope of the coming kingdom was that it would be a time when every man, woman and child sat under their own grape vine and fig tree, eating the fresh juicy snack in peace.

So when Jesus addresses the religious leaders, it is about not only religion, but about a national Israelite hope, the two were never far apart. If you recall Jesus had told them that the Kingdom of God is a like a vineyard where an owner employee's workers at 6 AM, 9 AM, Noon, 3 PM and 5 PM. Then at 6 all receive the same pay, which of course we understand as God's grace and gift of eternal life. Then last week we heard that the religious leaders and priests come once again to challenge his authority in teaching such Godly things and Jesus tells them about another vineyard owner. This vineyard owner had two sons, one who pretended to be faithful but really wasn't and another who really didn't want to or thought he could be faithful yet turned out doing the work of the Father. And we saw in that Story, Jesus was confronting those religious folks with their hypocrisy. He points out to them who they are in the story of the kingdom of God. They are the ones pretending to be the faithful and yet are not and he points out those who are not thought much of the outcasts and sinners who even though don't look like Godly people, they are doing the will of the Lord.

And then Jesus tells them yet another parable. A parable that reflects directly back to the words we read in Isaiah and the covenant of God with Israel. Jesus retells these very words when he talks about an owner who developed a field, put the walls of protection around it and dug the wine press and storage pit, built a watch tower and then leased it to some tenants. After the summer's growth, the harvest time comes and the produce is brought in and what they owe the owner is due. It is a covenant, signed lease, an obligation, and yet the lease holders now think they deserve it all, so they refuse to pay and attack the messengers sent to collect the owners due. So the owner sends some more slaves and the same thing happens. Finally to make sure the leaseholders honor the agreement, the owner sends his own Son and they strike him down and kill him.

And again Jesus shows the religious leaders who they are in the story and what God is doing. The religious leaders saw themselves as stewards, caretakers, and managers of God's laws and promises. But their vision left out the very ones God was concerned about, the lost sheep of Israel. What God had given them to share with others, they had re-appropriated for themselves and kept things just for those who were just like them. They left God's desires out of the picture. In fact, Jesus said, they had abused his messengers and would kill his Son. And in fact, right after they heard this parable the religious leaders do that very thing. The people who had rejected the servants of the Lord, the prophets of old all the way up to John the Baptist now turn against the Son of God, Jesus himself and plot how to kill him. So not only did they not learn from what Jesus told them, they acted exactly as he said they would!

The real question is are we any different today? The religious leaders of Jesus day could not see past themselves, their made up laws, their way of doing things, their ways of traditions and policies. Every thing was their way. They had lost touch with the reality that everything belongs to God and we are just the leaseholders for a short while. Are people any different today? We think what we have is ours, to do with as we see fit. It's not God's. I earned it, I worked hard for it. I made this money, I paid for this home, I bought this car, I paid for these clothes. I have a right to all this because it is mine and mine alone.

That seems to be the mind set of our world today. Just this week we have seen the government try to buy the way out of the credit crisis the country has found itself in. Too much cheap credit was out there for years, while people borrowed, more than they could make, while they got mortgages for homes larger than they needed, while they charged for this and that until finally the bubble burst and how do we try to get out of it. The government is going to buy 700 billion worth of bad debts and loans and mortgages in the hopes of cleaning off the books for

company's survival. For companies to survive so that people can continue buying and acquiring stuff. Is that the state of our society today?

In Jesus day the people did not like hearing that they were about the wrong business. That the gifts that had been given to them would be taken away. The kingdom of God taken from them and given to others who produce the fruits of the kingdom. Today we are no different, we don't like to be confronted by this word, to have this question posed to us. Who are we in that story of the vineyard? We would like to think of ourselves as greater than that. As changed people. As above all that.

Paul himself says that he could easily have boasted. In our second reading he reminds us that he could boast, if he wanted to. That he is of the right people, the chosen people, A Hebrew born of Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin, a student of the law, a Pharisee by faith, an up and coming religious leader of the Jewish faith, given power over life and death as he sought out the enemies of the church, righteous in all that he did. Accept now he realizes all that is counted as loss as compared to knowing the surpassing value of Christ Jesus our Lord. Everything else is rubbish in the light of knowing the grace of Jesus Christ. Paul realized that the greatest glory was not in attaining the power of leadership in the religious order, it was not in what school you attended, it was not in your lineage of birth, it was not in what you acquired in life, but rather it was in glory of God given to us through Jesus Christ.

We gather here this day because we also strive to take hold of that which lasts forever, the glory of Jesus Christ and his grace. We are the Lord's stewards, we are the servants given so much, blessed with this vineyard, and all that we have, and yet we so quickly seem to forget who it is we follow.

May you receive in the juice of the vineyard this day and taste the sacrifice that was made. Not by wealth, or power, or money, but by the one who gave up everything so that we might have the greatest gift, life. Taste and receive that blessing this day, examine your thoughts and your actions. Think about this parable and who you are in this story. May God open both our heart and our hands to do the work that he has given us to do now in this place. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come. AMEN.