

Pentecost 21/Proper 22 A, October 5, 2008
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO
Matthew 21:33—46

The Last Straw

Here we but a few short weeks before Halloween—can Thanksgiving and Christmas be far behind?—and the Church places in the middle of Holy Week. Jesus has entered Jerusalem as the true Messiah. Next on His agenda is the cleansing of the temple along with the healing of the blind and the lame. A fig tree withers under judgment. And the question is raised: **“By what authority are You doing these things?”** Last Sunday we heard Jesus tell the parable of the two sons—one son who refuses his father, but later repents and obeys, and the second son whose yes really means no.

With that parable Jesus underscores the disbelief and passivity of the priests and elders who refuse to repent. The priests and elders hold on to their stubbornness even though they personally witness the tax collectors prostitutes entering the kingdom of God ahead of them through repentance and faith.

Today Jesus relates another parable using details taken from the prophet Isaiah in today’s Old Testament reading: A landowner plants a vineyard, fences it in for protection, builds a watchtower for security, and prepares a winepress for enjoyment of the fruit of the vineyard. When business calls him out of the country, the landowner rents the vineyard to some farmers. Things are going along fine until the fruit ripens. That is when the landowner sends his servants to collect his fruit.

The renter/farmers no longer see the vineyards as belonging to the landowner but to themselves. Jesus reports the results: The renter/farmers seize the servants of the landowner: **“they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.”** The landowner sends more servants, only to have them meet the same end. The landowner resolves to send his son to the farmers. That’s the last straw, at least in the mind of the farmers. The farmers meet the son, not with desired respect, but with rejection, hatred, and death. In so doing, the farmers think they can get away with the inheritance of the landowner’s son.

By now you probably have figured out, much like the Pharisees and the elders have, who’s who in this story. Even Isaiah (5:7) has written down the answer: **“The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel.”** Israel has been chosen by God as His vineyard. God has placed that vineyard in the charge of the Judean authorities. The servants sent out to collect the fruit are the very prophets who have prepared the way for Jesus, the Messiah. Some of those prophets were stoned, others killed, almost all were ignored.

The farmers had considered the landowner’s son to be just one more interference with their plan. It is no different with the chief priests and Pharisees and their view of Jesus. The farmers reject the heir of the vineyard thinking they can inherit it instead. But how foolish they are, especially since the landowner is still alive and breathing down their necks at the end of the story. The only way their thinking could make sense is if they assumed the landowner was so far away that they could live out their scheme before the judgment would descend on them.

That's where the Pharisees and chief priests are in their thinking. As far as they are concerned, any kind of judgment is quite a ways down the road. And when judgment does come, they and their little vineyard of Israel will do quite nicely with their kind of Messiah. They are not prepared for some messianic pretender whose idea of salvation is to aggravate God's representatives into exterminating Him. They can conceive only their own vindictive version of the coming judgment. That is the judgment that will fall on them.

When Jesus asks the Pharisees and elders: **“When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”**, He gets them to say exactly what He would have said: **“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”** The stewardship of the mystery of salvation will be taken away from them, the present authorities who have exercised it in unfaith. Instead the stewardship of the mystery of salvation will be given to those who will exercise it in faith.

Those who fall in the judgment will do so because they have rejected the foundation for faith—the once rejected Jesus, the chief cornerstone described by the psalmist: **“The stone that the builders rejected has become the very cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes”** (Psalm 118:22-23) In effect, Jesus is saying that the world is saved only by His passion, death, and resurrection, and not in any of the devices that the world in its unbelief seeks refuge. Christ Jesus, as St. Paul tells First Church Corinth (1:23), is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. So many trip over Christ in unbelief.

Perhaps that is the last straw; at least it is for the chief priests and Pharisees, for they knew that Jesus **“was talking about them.”** He is also talking about us, about the way we reject Him with our unbelief, our insistence of adding some of our own effort into our salvation, of our bare minimum concept of commitment to Him.

Jesus is talking about us, but more importantly He is talking about Himself. He comes as the Son who is rejected; yet He will not reject. Even in His dying on the cross Christ cries out: **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”** He who owns all things, even the vineyard of our lives, gave up all that He owned and became one of us, possessing nothing, not even His life. Yet this Christ has taken all sin—your sin and mine—and even the last straw of sin that sticks our conscience with guilt and He pours it all into the black hole of His death and resurrection. He makes us free from sin and its power in death. And He gives us life—life in His eternal vineyard.

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