



St John Lutheran Church

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Text: St Matthew 21:33-43

Theme: "Caring for the Vineyard of the Lord"

When Jesus talked about a Vineyard, the people knew exactly what He meant. **The "Vineyard" was** a common Old Testament symbol for Israel, the People of God. **As we have** heard, for example, from the Prophet Isaiah this morning, in his song about the "Vineyard of the Lord." **So when Jesus** talked about the Vineyard, as He often did, the Jews of His day knew that He was pointing a finger at them. **Often, they did** not like what they heard. **As in our** Gospel this morning...He pointed out the failure of the Vineyard; or the sins of its "farmers" ... **the** leaders of the people, the teachers of the Law, the chief priests and so on.

But Jesus also says that He has come to save the Vineyard from its sins and failures. **"I AM the true Vine,"** He says in the Gospel of John, **"and you are My branches."** **Those are words** of grace and hope for all His people . . . **for** you and for me. **Because the Vineyard** of the Lord is no longer the political nation of Israel, somewhere over in modern Palestine. **Oh no. The Vineyard of** the Lord is the Body of Christ, His Church.

You and I are branches of that true Vine, members of Christ's Body, the Church. **And He has** given us ... **to each** of us in different ways ... **a portion** of His Vineyard to care for. **We are now** the "farmers" caring for the Vineyard of the Lord. **But are we** doing the job? **Are you doing** the job in your portion of God's Vineyard? **Are you caring** for the Vineyard of the Lord according to His Will . . . **here** within our congregation? **Within your homes** and families? **In your daily** encounters with the people around you? **In all these** things, the Lord has placed a portion of His Vineyard in your hands... **entrusting it** to your care. **Are you caring** for His Vineyard as He would have you care for it?

We should clarify what God requires for His Vineyard: **What does He expect of His people? For starters, what** was it that He expected of Israel in the Old Testament?

Well, the answer is simple, because the Lord spelled out very clearly what He wanted on Mount Sinai. **After He brought** the Children of Israel out of Egypt, He told them plainly, **"I will be your God, and you will be My People."** **He would be** faithful to them. **They should be** faithful to Him. **They should have** no other gods before Him. **They should not** take His Name in vain, nor neglect the preaching of His Word. **They should set** aside the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship.

And, as God had promised Abraham, the People of God would be a blessing to the nations. **The fruits of God's** Vineyard would be for the nourishment of the world ... **not just** for the Jews. **Especially in** the coming of Christ, Israel would become the source of salvation for all people. **"In you," said the Lord, "all the nations of the earth will be blessed."**

Basically, God expected His Vineyard to produce the fruits of righteousness to the glory of His Name. **He wanted His** People to receive His blessings with thanksgiving, and then to share those blessings with the world. **That is still** what God expects from His Vineyard today. **That is what** He expects of us, His Church, His Vineyard.

We, too, must remain faithful to God; for He has been faithful to us. **He has sent** His Son to die for us. **He has called** each of us by His own Name in Holy Baptism, and has thereby made us His children. **He has grafted** us into the true Vine, Jesus Christ, and has given us a portion of His Vineyard to cherish. **So we, too,** must have no other gods before Him. **And we, too,** must keep His Name holy among us, as the Catechism says, by calling upon our Holy Triune God in every situation with prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. **To do so,** we must not ignore the preaching of His Word, but gladly hear and learn It. **As Jesus says, "If you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples."**

Then, as we are nourished by the Word of God, the Vineyard must produce fruits for the nations all around us. **The Vineyard belongs** to the Lord, and what does He say? **"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in My Name and teaching them My Word."** **As the Vineyard** of the Lord, and as the farmers entrusted with its care, we should not produce fruits for our own benefit, but rather fruits of righteousness to the glory of God ... **the Vineyard Owner ... and** for the benefit of those around us.

Are we caring for the Vineyard of the Lord as He would have us do it? **Do we understand** that the Vineyard is not ours to do with as we like? **That it belongs** to God? **Are we nurturing** His Vineyard with the Word of God? **And are we** then producing fruits for the world around us? **Sadly, our typical** yield of fruit from God's Vineyard is far less and far different than what He expects... **Too often,** we get caught up in our own problems and concerns, instead of following His Will as revealed in His Word.

The Children of Israel did this, time and time again. **Under Moses, after** coming out of Egypt, the people complained on a daily basis: **not** enough food, or not enough water, or **"why does Moses get to be the leader?"** **How quickly they** forgot the blessings of God, Who had delivered them with His mighty arm. **In fact, the** history of Israel was a continuous cycle of disobedience and falling away from God; **followed** by the terrible consequences of sin; **followed** by God's powerful rescue in the day of trouble; **followed** by a short time of faithfulness to God; but always then **followed,** once again, with disobedience and falling away ... **over** and over again, with amazing regularity... **But** are we any better? **Don't we also** follow a similar pattern in our own little portions of the Vineyard? **Don't we tend** to focus more and more upon ourselves and on our own little issues, instead of on the purpose for which God puts us here?

Israel did. Over the years, they focused more and more on keeping the letter of the Law, and on keeping many other rules and regulations that God Himself had never given. **Meanwhile, their hearts** grew cold and hardened. **They forgot the** grace of God and thought themselves better than anyone else. **Instead of being** a blessing to the nations, they looked down on other nations as worthless and rejected by God. **When we do** become distracted ... **and** all of us do at times ... **then** what happens? **Instead of producing** the fruits of righteousness to the glory of God... **we** produce the fruits of pride and self-interest to the "glory" (or rather, I should say, to the shame) of no one but ourselves. **Where the Lord** expects good grapes from His Vineyard, we have nothing to offer but weeds and wild grapes instead. **Those weeds and** wild grapes show up, especially, in the way we treat each other, and in the way we receive the servants of God. **That's the issue** Jesus points to in our Parable this morning.

So, how should the "servants" of the Lord be received? **These "servants"** of the Vineyard were the Prophets of Yahweh in the Old Testament, and then Saint John the Baptist and the Apostles in Jesus' day. **And these servants** were sent by God as His personal representatives, His **"power of attorney"** in our modern legal language... **which is** to say, they spoke the Word of God with the authority of God Himself.

But Israel "stoned the Prophets and killed those sent to her," as Jesus says point blank in the Gospel of Luke, and as He graphically portrays in our Parable of the Vineyard. **The Book of Hebrews** even gives some of the details: **"Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were**

stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about. . . destitute, persecuted, and mistreated." Not a very inviting job description, is it?

Now, following the death of the Apostles... **the Pastors** of the Church are most clearly the visible "servants" of God in the sense used in our Parable. **They, too, are** sent by God to preach His Word to His Vineyard. **But as history** repeats itself, it is becoming more and more common for Pastors of all denominations to be "fired" (or driven out of their office in some other way) not because they teach false doctrine or live immoral lives... **but** simply because their personality clashes with the members of their congregations; **or** because they are not willing to serve as "hired hands," but stick to their guns in maintaining the truth of God's Word. **And so, even to** this day, the servants of God are being treated shamefully and thrown out of His Vineyard.

The sad reality is, that throughout the history of the Church, the Vineyard has failed to receive the servants of God with appropriate thanks and appreciation. **Like the farmers** in the Parable, we too have stoned the prophets and killed those sent to us ... **even** if we have become more refined and subtle about it. **And so our** God responds by sending the most perfect Servant of all... **His own** dear Son, Jesus Christ. **"I will send my own beloved Son,"** He says. **"Perhaps this One they will respect."**

But of course, Israel received the Son of God by nailing Him to a Cross. **They questioned His** authority. **They plotted against** Him. **And in the** end, they threw the Son of God out of His own Vineyard; after killing Him!

Saint Matthew records that the chief priests and the Pharisees knew that Jesus had spoken the Parable against them. **But we,** too, must understand that we are just as guilty. **We, too, must** know that Jesus spoke this Parable also against our sins. **Certainly, it was** our sins, as well, that nailed Him to the Cross.

But what, finally, does the death of the Vineyard–Owner's Son really mean for us? **Well, first of all,** the rejection of Christ by the nation of Israel demonstrates that God has taken His Vineyard away from that one particular nation and has now entrusted it to the Christian Church around the world. **The Vineyard now** includes both Jews and Gentiles, all who believe the Gospel of Christ.

But even more importantly, the **"Stone which the builders rejected has become the Head of the corner".... the "Capstone"** or Cornerstone around which everything is built. **The death of** Christ was not His defeat, but His great victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. **As a result,** the Vineyard is now healed and forgiven; **we are now** healed and forgiven, because Christ Himself has taken the place of us poor, unproductive vines. He has paid the penalty of our sins and our unfruitfulness, and we are forgiven.

Now Christ is the true Vine from which the entire Vineyard draws its life. **In Him, the** Vineyard now is fruitful and productive. **Instead of weeds** and wild grapes, the Vineyard now produces the good grapes that God expects. **For Christ Himself** is also now the Caretaker of His Vineyard, through the work of servants whom He sends in His Name and stead, and by His Gospel... **Word and Sacraments.**

With Christ as our forgiveness, as our Vine, and as our Caretaker, we flourish in God's Vineyard. **For by the** Grace and Power of Christ, and by His Spirit, we do produce the fruits of righteousness to the glory of His Name and the good of our neighbor. **Or rather, Christ** produces those fruits within and among us. **For listen now** to another little song that the Prophet Isaiah wrote about the Vineyard of the Lord: **"Sing about a fruitful Vineyard: I, the Lord, watch over it; I water it continually. I guard it day and night so that no one may harm it. I am not angry. Let them come to Me for refuge; let them make peace with Me, yes, let them make peace with Me."** In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...amen

Pentecost, 20A, 2008

Rev. Eric M. Christiansen

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