

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, October 8, 2023 // Proper 22, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 21:33-46

Jesus said, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when 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 lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?"

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Background and general observations

The context for this lesson is important. Jesus has entered Jerusalem in triumph, riding on a donkey, as great crowds of people hail him as the messianic Son of David. They spread cloaks and branches on the road as they shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David..." Then, of course, Jesus enters the temple, the ultimate symbol of the religious leaders, and overturns the tables of the money changers. It's important to know that the money changers were not bad people; they performed a simple but important function of changing unclean money for acceptable coinage—this was a familiar requirement, something that made one's offering acceptable. (Kind of like the manager of the fancy restaurant who keeps a supply of blazers in a back closet for gentlemen who are not properly dressed but who wish to dine there?) What Jesus is doing is removing barriers to God and to participation in the religious institutions of the day.

Jesus then cures the blind and the lame who are brought to him, and it becomes clear that Jesus' conflict is not with the Jewish people generally but with the religious leaders. We see that the crowds welcome and cheer him on, and Jesus continues to care for the sick and the suffering among the people. But the religious leaders are the ones who confront Jesus and challenge his authority. Jesus is breaking down barriers in the religious institutions of his day, and the present guardians of the institution are offended. Jesus is undaunted, as he tells the leaders in the verses which precede this lesson that the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of them.

After Jesus' initial outburst in the temple, he spends the night outside the temple precincts and returns the next day. On his way back to the temple, he curses the fruitless fig tree, which symbolizes the present religious leaders who have not produced the fruit expected of them. And when Jesus returns to the temple, he tells three parables, this one being the second.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. To help think about this passage, it may be interesting to consider how parents raise their children: parents recognize that they can set everything up for their children; they can plant the vineyard, put up a fence, dig a wine press, build a watchtower... It's what attentive and loving parents do in providing good nutrition and healthcare for their children, teaching them appropriate boundaries, promoting education and independence, and helping them learn how to be safe and secure and in healthy relationship to others. But there comes a time, of course, sooner or later, when parents have to accept their limitations, even their inadequacies, and then "go away to another country." That is, parents at some point have to pull back, whether they want to or not; after they have done whatever they can do and given whatever they can give, they must now let their children learn to grow and develop on their own, make their decisions, cultivate their own vineyard. It is a kind of surrendering.

You might think about this particularly if you yourself are a parent, but certainly as you remember your own childhood: what do you know about the tension between setting it all up for a child—or having it set up for you—and then leaving, or being left, so that an independent life might be cultivated? What was painful about that experience? What was necessary to learn?

What do you know about desiring an independence you do not seem to have in cultivating your vineyard? What do you know of interference, rescue, or hindrance?

On the other hand, perhaps sometimes we are in need of rescue, or our children need us to rescue them, and this might propagate another complicated set of decisions and questions. How have you learned to balance human strength and independence with human frailty and a need for help?

2. The parable in this passage could raise questions about how involved God is in our day-to-day lives. How much do you sense that God has "left you" to cultivate your life on your own? Do you wish God were more involved? What about the balance between our having free will and our having a God who is ready to step in and take over?

Ponder the tension between being responsible for your life and regularly submitting your life to God.

3. Consider this parable from the point of view of the landowner. What do you know about the experience of being kind and generous to someone over a long period of time, only to have your kindness and generosity scorned or ignored?

When have you experienced this sort of thing in a relationship that was important to you? How did you respond? What have you learned?

As the background information above makes clear, Jesus' conflict was not with the Jewish people generally but with the religious leaders. Where have you seen religious leaders being overly protective of the status quo, overly ego-driven, or defensive about their own sense of authority and power?

4. If a group of people in your church were focused more intently on welcoming all sorts and conditions of people into your church's life, and if they believed the church's mission is to draw all people into a deeper and closer relationship with God, and if the fruit of such a mission was the growth of a more open, embracing, and compassionate community, with crowds of people drawing closer in gratitude, why might such people encounter resistance in your church? What is in the way?

Have you ever had a sense that certain religious traditions or customs have become too precious—too affected or contrived—instead of being a means to an end or symbolic representations of the human-divine relationship? What do you believe can be done to protect ancient traditions while also ensuring they never become rote, insincere or artificial?

5. The great Reformation theologian Martin Luther said that the first thing Christians should do upon waking in the morning is make the sign of the cross, as a way of reminding ourselves that we belong to God.

The experience of many is that, if I want to go deeper in my life, I have to remember who I am and whose I am. That is, I have to remember who the owner is, who has given me this life to cultivate and work to avoid the temptation to think of myself as the owner. Many of us have high control needs. But the example of Jesus was that he regularly set aside time to go to a lonely place and remember who he was and to whom he ultimately belonged. We might say that in prayer, he was reconnecting with his source, consulting with the landowner.

Consider again the tension between a responsibility and accountability for your own life and regularly submitting your life and surrendering yourself to God. Are you tempted to forget God and simply take charge yourself? Or, are you regularly setting aside time to remember who you are and whose you are? What changes might you make in your daily life in order to sense the deeper truth of your life and "ownership"? And if you grew in your sense of ultimate belonging to God, how would that change your relationships with others and your outlook on your life?