

Isaiah 5:1-7  
Matthew 21:33-46

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
October 8, 2017

## **Fruits of the Kingdom**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

Our Old Testament Lesson today is taken from the fifth chapter of the book of Isaiah. The people of Israel whom God had called and blessed have fallen far short of God's intention for them. They have exploited the poor, worshipped idols, exhibited pride and arrogance, and denigrated the land. God's vineyard should yield good grapes, not wild ones. Listen to these words from Isaiah 5:1-7...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

The parable of The Wicked Tenants in Matthew 21 is the second in a series of three parables that Jesus tells in the temple. We also find it in Mark and Luke. We can read the parable as an allegory where God is the landowner, Israel is the vineyard, members of the Jewish religious establishment are the tenant farmers, the prophets of the Old Testament are God's representatives who come to collect what is due, Jesus is the son who finally comes to collect and who is killed, and the church is the group invited to work in the vineyard at the end of the parable. Listen to these words of our Gospel Lesson from Matthew 21:33-46...

### *Sermon*

When you were growing up, did your parents ever have to take anything away from you because you didn't look after it? If so, you can understand what Jesus is talking about in the parable of The Wicked Tenants.

Herein he employs one of the ancient symbols for the nation of Israel—the vineyard. And those who heard the parable would know without a doubt about whom Jesus was speaking, namely, the chief priests, scribes, and elders. Furthermore, as William Barclay says, Jesus uses a situation which was quite common in his day. For Palestine was a troubled land with many absentee landlords. And it was not unusual for a man to lease his property while he went to live in a more comfortable country. The rent then could be paid in three different ways. It could be a fixed sum of money, an agreed upon proportion of the crop, or a certain amount of produce regardless of what the crop was. And in this troubled time it did sometimes happen that tenants would refuse to pay or even resort to violence to gain possession of property that was not legally theirs.

Our lesson from Isaiah reminds us that Israel was a people chosen to know God's blessing and to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. He had led them out of Egyptian bondage and given them rules to live by. He had led them to a Promised Land that flowed with milk and honey. God expected the people to bear fruit—to fulfill his call, to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. But there in Israel we find that the fruit being borne was bad fruit.

...he expected justice,  
 but saw bloodshed;  
 righteousness,  
 but heard a cry! (Isa. 5:7b)

In our New Testament parable, we find that the vineyard was hedged around so that wild animals could not enter. The wine-press, which was a great stone-lined pit in the earth, was dug so that the grapes could be pressed and their wonderful juice extracted. A watch tower was erected so that sentinels could keep guard against robbers. All of this was provided so that there would be a harvest of good fruit. But those benefits did not guarantee fruitfulness.

One of the great tests of life is, “How do we use what we have been given?”

Oscar Wilde tells this parable:

Jesus was walking through the streets of a city. In an open courtyard, he saw a young man feasting gluttonously and growing drunk with wine. “Young man,” said Jesus, “why do you live like that?” “I was a leper,” said the young man, “and you cleansed me. How else should I live?” Jesus went on, and he saw a young girl clad in tawdry finery, a girl of the streets, and after her came a young man with eyes like a hunter. “Young man,” said Jesus, “why do you look at that girl like that?” “I was blind,” said the young man, “and you opened my eyes. How else should I look?” “Daughter,” said Jesus to the girl, “why do you live like that?” “I was a sinner,” she said, “and you forgave me. How else should I live?” (William Barclay, *And Jesus Said*, p. 141)

Three people who were wonderfully blessed by Jesus, but nonetheless did not become a blessing to others. Just because we come from a good home and parents that encouraged us and took us with them to church, just because we live in a country that provides us the freedom to worship as we choose; just because we have been able to receive a good education; none of these blessings guarantee that we will be fruitful workers in the Kingdom of God.

The tenants in the parable had the freedom to work as they pleased. The owner had gone away to another country and entrusted them with the responsibility to be good stewards of his vineyard. It’s been said that *fate* is what we are compelled to do; while *destiny* is what we are meant to do. As members of the Church of Christ, you and I have a destiny—we are meant to bear the fruit of the kingdom, to do God’s work. The Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini was once rehearsing an orchestra which was putting forth little effort. Quietly the conductor laid aside his baton and said, “Gentlemen, God has told me how he wants this piece of music played; and you—you hinder God.”

There's a story about an elderly business owner and his superintendent:

[This business owner] was, by all accounts, a successful man. He was a builder of fine homes in an upscale American suburb and was known to all as a creative craftsman, a shrewd businessman, a fair-minded employer, and a generous benefactor. But he was aging now, and before he set out for Florida for the winter, he approached his top superintendent and told him that he was retiring. "I want you to build me a home, the finest home this company has ever built. Spare no expense, use the finest materials, employ the most gifted tradesmen, and build me a masterpiece before I come home next spring."

The next day, the superintendent set out to build that home, but not exactly to orders. If his boss was retiring, that meant he would be losing his job, so he needed to pad his own savings account, lest he be destitute. He ordered inferior concrete blocks for the foundation, but charged the builder for premium blocks, and he pocketed the difference.

The superintendent hired inexperienced carpenters, plumbers, electricians, roofers and landscapers, but he charged his boss wages that would be paid to master craftsmen, and he put the difference in his own bank account. He installed cheap appliances and lighting, insufficient insulation, inferior carpet, and drafty windows, while he skimmed a tidy sum off the top for himself. In the spring, when the home was finished, it looked spectacular; it was the signature home in the neighborhood, and the only thing that made the superintendent happier than how the project looked was the bottom line in his personal bank account, which had grown by hundreds of thousands of dollars that winter.

When the elderly business owner arrived home from Florida that spring, he toured this home fit for a king, and he was ecstatic. The superintendent handed him the keys and thanked his boss for the privilege of working for him all these years. And then the owner did an unthinkable thing: he said to the superintendent "You have been a trusted friend and a loyal partner in my business for all of these years; you deserve a home like this." And he handed him the keys.

And so, the wicked superintendent would reap what he had sown. As a poor steward, he would have to live in an inferior home whose looks were quite deceiving.

Now, we should not fail to note the patience of God in our parable from Matthew.

Whereas Isaiah's "beloved" planter uprooted his vineyard in anger when it produced wild grapes,

the owner in Jesus' parable displays great patience. He sends an agent to collect produce and the sharecroppers beat him. He sends another who is also beaten and humiliated. Still another is dispatched and is killed. Finally he sends his own son, who is also murdered. In hearing the parable Jesus' audience must have wondered what was the matter with the owner, to permit such abuse. But for those who have ears to hear, we see God's great and astonishing mercy. Like the father in the parable of "The Prodigal Son," where the father waits and waits for his wayward son to come home. Someone said, "It is not the peace of God, but the pain of God that passes understanding."

Nonetheless, there will be consequences to opposition to God's prophets and his own beloved Son. The people will not continue as tenants of God's vineyard. But there is also a word of warning to new tenants—to the church and to Christians like you and me. Unless we bear fruit, the vineyard may yet again be transferred. For the owner of the vineyard still expects righteous living, compassionate caring, and courageous witnessing. He still expects us to be good stewards and to bear fruit in his vineyard. Not just to have correct beliefs and sound theology, but also to bear "good fruits." As John the Baptist had proclaimed, "Produce fruit that shows you have changed lives." (Mt. 3:8) Whereby, we love God and our neighbor as we love ourselves. For example, by supporting our upcoming Bazaar whereby we will provide a helping hand to the ministry of Thornwell Home in Clinton. Or by delivering Meals on Wheels, providing food and a word of cheer.

And fortunately we are not left to our own resources, but the Spirit enables us to bear the fruit God desires: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal 5:22-23) God not only calls us to be faithful followers of Christ, but also enables us to fulfill our calling.

Jesus is God's stone, the cornerstone of God's work. His role is decisive. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Though rejected by many of his own people and put to death on a cross of great suffering, God raised the Son from the dead and gave him a name that is above every name.

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11)

Our job is to be faithful witnesses to this good news of the gospel.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.