

[Jesus said to the people:] ³³“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. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They 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.”

⁴²Jesus 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?’ ⁴³Therefore 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. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Sometimes we labor through difficult tasks because we crave the end result of it all. This is the case with musicians, athletes, students, and a long list of other endeavors. Sometimes the work is boring or really wears us down. But we justify it all when we reach the end results. “It was worth it.”

Our parable today could have simply begun with this phrase; “There was a landowner who had a vineyard.” That would be easy enough. That sentence gets straight to the point. Instead, Jesus

begins the parable with this phrase; “There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower.” The difference is that these details emphasize that this landowner put in the work, you might say. The parable leads us to imagine this as a sizable vineyard, so imagine the work it would for this one person to plant it all and build the fence that surrounds it. The landowner dug the winepress, too. What digging a winepress involved in the Ancient Near East was finding a boulder and chiseling the whole thing into a wide bowl, inside of which the grapes would go and someone would do their best Lucille Ball impression of squashing those grapes. (Yes, I just made a 65 year old pop culture reference.) Finally, a watchtower is built in order to do what all watchtowers do: allow an observer to see any approaching threats to the vineyard.

The irony in this parable is this vineyard is not threatened by something on the outside, but by what is on the inside: the very tenants whom the landowner entrusted the vineyard to. When Jesus told this parable, his audience would have been familiar with this business arrangement. This landowner-tenant relationship was quite common. Similar to sharecropping in America, an arrangement is worked out that the tenants will do the work and at the harvest provide a certain quantity of the produce to the landowner. So far, so good... but we know this particular landowner has done the unusual task of investing personal sweat equity into this vineyard. So this landowner has skin in the game when an arrangement is struck with the tenants. This landowner’s heart is in this vineyard.

Like most parables there is some hyperbole in this one. No real tenant would have expected to get away with beating, stoning, and killing the slaves that are sent to collect the produce that rightfully belongs to the landowner. But these parabolic tenants do that, and when the landowner’s own son is sent as an emissary, they kill him too with the idea in mind that they’ll now get his inheritance.

And that is the end of the parable. No recompense is paid. Jesus brings no resolution to the story. However, Jesus does ask those who were listening -- the chief priests and the people -- what should be done to the tenants, and they offer an answer. But instead of confirming whether they are correct... whether the landowner actually had the tenants killed... Jesus shifts focus. Instead of

discussing the landowner or the tenants, he quotes a psalm. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.” He is foreshadowing what is about to transpire.

Today’s gospel picks up right where last week’s left off. Catching up, the crowds pick up palm branches and hail Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem. He immediately goes to the temple, flips some tables, then heals the blind and lame. The chief priests witness all this, and when Jesus returns to the temple the next morning, they butt heads with him about who authorized his and John the Baptist’s ministries. So he tells them the parable of the two sons and a vineyard, implying that the chief priests have said that they will do God’s work in the vineyard -- that is Israel -- but they have utterly failed to show the people God’s grace, mercy, and compassion.

Then Jesus tells today’s parable. God is introduced as one landowner who has actually put in the personal sweat equity to establish this vineyard. This landowner cares deeply about what will come of this vineyard. The chief priests are the tenants who decide that they can run God’s kingdom without God. They would rather hoard the produce of the vineyard and kill the landowner’s servants and son who come to set things right. The greatest threat to the productivity of this vineyard is not any approaching enemy on the outside, but the very people who had been entrusted to care for the vineyard. To be absolutely clear on this, this parable does not criticize Jews or their faith. Too often this parable has been misinterpreted in ways that purposefully dredge up anti-jewish sentiments. Rightly understood in the context of scripture, Jews are the original part of this expanding vineyard and they will always have a beloved place in the vineyard.

This parable places fault directly on the chief priests in Jesus’ day, who served in a hybrid religious and political leadership over the people. So the first person today who should check himself upon reading this parable is me. I am a religious leader who has been entrusted to teach and preach God’s word in my life and my actions. The question this parable poses for us today is whether your pastors are leading others to recognize God’s grace, mercy, and steadfast love in their lives. The question is whether your pastors are cultivating a community that cares for the poor, feeds the hungry, and sets free the captive. That is the harvest that God desires, and Pastor Ginger and I are tenants who are accountable for whatever this small patch of the vineyard yields. So Pastor

Ginger and I are supposed to bring the best qualities out of you. We are fine with carrying that responsibility. We agreed to it when we said yes to this work.

An important side note here is that in Jesus' day the chief priests were religious leaders as well as political leaders and teachers. Although today we separate those roles, that doesn't negate the fact that God still has expectations of our leaders. These people -- religious, political, educational, or otherwise -- should bring out the best qualities of their people. Frankly, if God has that expectation, then you and I should also expect our leaders to bring out the best in their people.

I admit that I often have stumbled or have even failed in this matter. Yet some good news in this parable for me and for us all is what it leaves out: the unfinished ending. Like those who responded to Jesus with a possible ending, you and I would expect the landowner to have the tenants killed for what they have done. But we aren't told that, and fortunately for us God is far more gracious than we would ever expect or deserve.

The parable concludes with Jesus shifting our attention to the stone that was rejected. Which is fitting. The parable began with the landowner's agreement being rejected, then slaves who were rejected, and finally the landowner's son who was rejected. Instead of an ending, Jesus gives us a transition: the rejected stone. The rejected stone rejects the finality of death and becomes the cornerstone for something new. Even though the worst can be thrown at the Son, he rises again to lay claim to the vineyard that rightfully belongs to God. God has put the blood, sweat, and tears into this vineyard so it will yield grace, mercy, and steadfast love like God's own. No amount of human misdeeds will ever usurp God's rightful ownership of the vineyard. God put in the labor to establish the vineyard, and God will always cultivate it to yield the produce God desires.

Thanks be to God. Amen.