

## 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (L27A) – October 4, 2026

Matthew 21:33-46

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

In my sermon last week, I mentioned the seasonal turn that is upon us in the transition from summer to fall, and the accompanying change in the tone of our Sunday readings. We're in the last quarter of Matthew's gospel now. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem and the series of events that will lead to his crucifixion is rapidly unfolding. Ever since setting his face toward Jerusalem, Jesus has been connecting his fate to the fate of his disciples. The way of the cross that he follows will become the paradigm for the church after his resurrection and ascension. Following Jesus means taking up our own crosses, Jesus says. Ultimately, Jesus is reassuring his followers that just as suffering and death will not have the final word for him, so they will not have the final word for the church that will follow in his footsteps. And that's really good news. But it comes with some really bad news. The world is a mess, and the way of the cross is not easy. Those who follow that way are bound to suffer. And even though death doesn't get the final word for us, it does get a word. We will die. All of us. There is no way around that – only through it. But because there is a way through, there is also a way to live faithfully in the present, through whatever difficulties that faithfulness incurs.

So, I'm letting you know that this will be the tone of the readings for many of the Sundays between now and Christ the King Sunday seven weeks from now, though we'll interrupt those readings on both Reformation and All Saints Sunday. I'm sorry about that. And you should know that we pastors talk about this. We'll even complain to each other when we gather to study: "Ugh, another difficult text!" someone will say. And because we have some retired pastors who don't preach every week, one of them might say, "I'm sure glad I'm not preaching this week!" Because we don't like difficult texts either, and we don't like to be the bearers of bad news. Nobody likes that. But bad news is important for us to hear, especially when it can help us see the good news that lies beyond it.

Our first reading today will be familiar to you if you attend our Easter Vigil. It serves as a sung response to one of the readings, and in fact it's a favorite of both of my children who have served as cantors over the years. But the version sung at the Vigil omits the difficult verses that talk about the destruction of the vineyard, because the Vigil is focused on God's desire for God's people and the care that God has taken on our behalf as we await God's final answer to sin, death, and evil in Jesus' resurrection. But the full, unredacted reading that we have in front of us this morning is really focused more on the failure of God's people to live in right relationship with one another. They have produced the bad fruit of oppression, injustice, and exploitation.

It has been popular among some American Christians to compare the United States with the chosen people of Israel, and to see our country as being the modern heirs of God's blessing and attention. That can be inspiring when we're remembering the stories of God's call to Abraham and Sarah, or the story of the exodus from slavery in Egypt and the conquest of the promised land. But the fact that God warned the people against having kings, and the repeated failure of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah to rule their people faithfully and justly is usually missing from this comparison, as is the conquest of those kingdoms that Isaiah foretells in this passage. It recently came to my attention that some of our government officials have been quoting from the next chapter of Isaiah to portray the current war in Iran as a holy war. We're asked to be like Isaiah in volunteering to be a part of that: "Here I am," Isaiah famously says in chapter 6, "send me!" But this is a misreading of scripture. God wasn't sending Isaiah off to fight in a foreign war, or on a

domestic purge of supposedly foreign agents. God was sending Isaiah to proclaim a difficult message to his own people, a message that their unfaithfulness, their greed, their deceit, and their mistreatment of their fellow citizens would no longer be tolerated. There is no good news in this Isaiah reading this morning, or indeed in the following chapter of Isaiah's call story. But our Psalm today is a prayer from within the ruined vineyard, asking "why have you broken down its walls," and pleading with God for the restoration Isaiah speaks of elsewhere.

Jesus is clearly drawing on the vineyard imagery of Isaiah 5 and connecting it to himself in today's Gospel reading. He is the heir of the vineyard owner who has come looking for good fruit after other messengers were rejected and mistreated. If we the church are the Pharisees in this story, as I always suggest that we are, and if the Pharisees are the tenants, as they came to realize by the end of the reading, then the indictment is that we have treated the church as our own possession, serving our private religious needs but not always producing the fruit of good news for those outside our circle. Now I don't think that is the full story for us here at Grace, or for our Central/Southern Illinois Synod that will gather here this afternoon to talk about being a more faithful vineyard as we live into our future. I think two things can be true at once. We have been a congregation and a synod that have, by God's grace, borne good fruit, and been a source of hope and care for those outside our walls. But we have also, at times, been self-absorbed and inwardly focused like those bad tenants.

Jesus' conclusion to his parable is not the destruction of the vineyard, as it is in Isaiah, but replacing the bad tenants with good ones. It seems to me that that could happen in two ways. It could mean that there is no hope for the bad tenants, that it's the end of the line for them. They are kicked out and different and better tenants brought in. That, I think, would be the plain reading of the text. But another way to replace bad tenants with good ones is by *transforming them* from bad to good. Could that be a way of reading Jesus' parable here? I'll acknowledge that it becomes pretty graphic and disturbing when he switches up metaphors from the vineyard to a building site, with himself as the rejected building block that becomes the cornerstone of a new building, a block that will trip people up and even crush them. That doesn't sound good for the bad tenants, if we're still talking about tenants.

But again, I think two things can be true at once. Let's remember again from our reading a month ago that Jesus called his own inner-circle disciple Peter a stumbling block to him, in the same breath that he also called him Satan! And that was not Peter's last failing. But because we know the end of the story, we know that none of that was the end of the line for Peter, and that he later became an important leader of the early church and a faithful witness of the gospel. Peter was not the only one to undergo that kind of transformation. And that brings us to our second reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians, which is where we will find the good news in today's readings. Paul, as you know, had been an ardent persecutor of the church before he was encountered by the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. That was a certainly a crushing blow to the old Paul. You might even call it a death and resurrection kind of experience for him, a transformation so radical that he came to regard everything achieved in his former life as rubbish.

Paul could undergo such a death and life kind of transformation because Jesus had first paved the way by his own death and resurrection. And that is our story too, we who have been joined to Christ in his death and resurrection in Holy Baptism. It is for this reason that we gather each week to be encountered by the risen Jesus, so that we may be freed from our past like Paul and press on into the future sustained by the baptismal promise of new life, a life that will produce good fruit for us and for the world God loves. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.