

April 3, 2022
Fifth Sunday of Lent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Luke 20:9-20 (Philippians 3:8-14)

CHRIST IS OUR CORNERSTONE.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Luke, the 20th chapter, which you heard read earlier.

A fellow once said: “*You can’t cut bread so close that there are not two sides.*” Let’s say that from Susan’s perspective, her husband Sam is hiding something from her. She fears that he is having an affair. And, as it turns out Sam, *is indeed* hiding something. Except he’s planning a surprise get-a-way weekend for their anniversary. There are always two sides. Or, let’s say that from your perspective, the check-out lady at the store is the coldest and grumpiest person you have ever met. The side which you cannot see is that her husband just left her for another woman, or she just lost a loved one to death, or one of a hundred other tragic scenarios that play out in the lives of everyday people. There are always two sides.

Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenants has two sides. On the one side, it is a certain and severe pronouncement of God’s judgment upon the house of Israel, its religious leaders, and all who rebel against God, rejecting His gifts of love and grace. On the other side; however, looking from this side of Cavalry’s cross, our Lord speaks this parable to you and me today, as members of the new Israel, His holy Christian Church. On one side, the parable pronounces the harsh threat of God’s Law and judgement. But looking from the other side, we see our Lord calling us to repentance so that He can comfort us with His lovely, sweet, and soothing Gospel, which is, God’s grace in Christ.

Our Gospel text takes place inside Jerusalem, just a few days before Jesus would be put to death. His time is short, so in attempt to soften any unbelieving stone-cold hearts, so He told the people a parable. (cf: Luke 20:19).

In the parable a man planted a vineyard, rented it out to tenants, and went away for a long while. (cf: Luke 20:9) According to his contract with the tenants, there was a time when he, the owner, would send a servant to collect his share of the crop from the tenants. When the time came, he sent a servant whom the tenants beat and sent away empty-handed. (cf: Luke 20:10) So he sent a second servant and then a third, whom the tenants also beat, mistreat, and send away empty-handed. (cf: Luke 20:11) Then the owner decided to do the absurd. He would send his *beloved son* to collect the fruits of the crop. Perhaps the tenants would respect him. (cf: Luke 20:13) Our text says:

“¹⁴ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.’ ¹⁵ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.” (Luke 20:14–15)

In the parable, God the Father is the man who planted the vineyard. The tenant farmers are God’s chosen people Israel. God has created a covenant with Israel, allowing them to live under His gracious love and mercy, asking only that they bring forth fruits of faith. (cf: Isaiah 5:1-7) But they continually turn their backs on Him, reaping the crop of His grace without returning fruits of faith. They want nothing to do with His gracious covenant. So He would patiently send servants, prophet after prophet, to remind them of God’s gracious love for them and forgiveness for all who repent, return to Him, and bear fruits of faith and righteousness. But they wouldn’t listen. They’d simply kill the prophets.

In the ultimate act of love, the Owner sent His ***beloved Son***, an unmistakable reference to God the Father’s words spoken from heaven at Jesus’ Baptism and Transfiguration when He proclaimed:

“You are my beloved Son...” (Luke 3:22; cf: Mark 9:2)

And indeed, God’s ***beloved Son***, our Lord Jesus Christ, in a few days after telling this parable, would be rejected, thrown outside of the vineyard of Jerusalem, and killed on the cross. (cf: John 19:17-18; Hebrews 13:12-13)

You and I often act like the wicked tenants toward our gracious and loving Creator. Everything you have and everything that you are is a gracious gift from God. He has made you His steward of His gifts requiring nothing from you except fruits of faith. Yet, you reject the fact that He is the Owner. You seek to lay claim to what really is not yours: your life; your time, talents, and treasures that He entrusted to you – along with the people and world which you take advantage of, abuse, or treat selfishly – rather than bring forth fruits of faith.

Like the wicked tenants, you and I reject God’s gracious call through His Word. Those times when you ignore His Word, don’t study and learn it, don’t inwardly digest it and take it to heart. It is when you and I make worship as something optional, reject and spurn the covenant God made with you in Baptism and in His Holy Supper.

On one side of the parable we see God’s judgment upon all who rebel against Him and reject His gift of love and grace. The owner destroys the tenants and gives the vineyard to others. (cf: Luke 20:15-16) In one sense, Jesus is talking about the land that Israel occupied, which in less than 40 years would be taken away and given to others. But more importantly, Jesus is talking about the mystery of His kingdom, the stewardship of His grace that was entrusted to Israel but would soon be given to another steward, the members of the new Israel, His holy Christian Church.

Jew and Gentile alike, all who are baptized and believe in Christ Jesus are the “***others***” which Jesus says will be given the vineyard. You are one of the new tenants, not by your doing, but by God’s baptismal grace in Christ. You are an heir, not because of your status, but by the death of the Son. And that’s the other side of the parable. The death of the Son becomes the life of the world. The death of Son grants the inheritance. The death of the Son secures your forgiveness, your life, your salvation, and your justification.

Jesus quotes Psalm 118, saying:

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” (Luke 20:17)

When He is thrown outside of the vineyard and killed on the cross, Jesus pays the full wages of mankind’s sin and your sin – for you. The religious leaders reject Him but in His resurrection, He is exalted by God who builds the Christian Church on His beloved Son, the Cornerstone, who is the Church’s one foundation.

And as we consider that there are always two sides, listen closely to Jesus words in verse 18 concerning Himself as the cornerstone. He says:

“¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” (Luke 20:18)

Two things can happen. You either fall on the stone and are broken – or – it falls on you and you are crushed. We talk about it often. God’s Word never returns void. Something ***always*** happens when the Word of God is proclaimed. A person’s heart is either softened in faith or it is further hardened in unbelief. It happened when God’s Old Testament prophets proclaimed His Word. It happened during the Apostolic ministry after Jesus’ ascension into heaven. And it still happens today.

Two things can happen. Everyone will be either broken or crushed. All who trust and believe in Christ, when they hear God’s Law and judgment, they stumble and fall over the Cornerstone, who is Christ, and are left with a broken and contrite heart which is ready to be recreated by the sweet and comforting Gospel of forgiveness and new life in Christ. Unfortunately for those who do not believe, the Word of God’s Law brings the crushing blow of judgment. The Cornerstone falls on their hardened hearts, crushes them and grinds them into dust. They are blown away like chaff into the unquenchable fire. (cf: Luke 3:17)

There is no neutrality with Jesus. You are either with Him or against Him. (cf: Luke 9:50) As Simeon prophetically proclaimed in the temple when he beheld the Lord’s Christ, He took the forty-day-old Jesus up in his arms and said:

“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel...”
(Luke 2:34; cf: Luke 2:26-28)

It’s either faith or unbelief when it comes to Jesus. You either fall on Christ by faith with your sin, your brokenness, your despair, take up your cross and follow Him – or – you end up crushed by the sheer weight of judgment coming down against your own self-righteousness.

Christ Jesus is the Cornerstone of your faith. He gives you new life and fruitful labor in His vineyard. In our epistle text the apostle Paul describes what life in the vineyard looks like for the Christian. Before his call to faith and conversion, Paul had every reason to trust that he was saved by his own self-righteousness. He called himself ***blameless under the Law***. (cf: Philippians 3:4-6) But once he was called to faith by the Gospel, whatever he previously had, he now counted as loss for the sake of Christ. (cf: Philippians 3:8) For the sake of Jesus, he gave up all things and counted them as ***rubbish*** – literally meaning “***manure***.”

All your works of righteousness are waste and rubbish. But as a baptized believer, your righteousness comes by the grace of God alone, to be received by faith alone. Christ's resurrection makes possible your faith and future resurrection. And the greatest pleasure for the Christian is to follow the pattern of Jesus who came to seek and save the lost and to give His life as a ransom. You have the pleasure of being faithful stewards of all of God's gifts, using them to God's glory, suffering all, even unto death. (cf: Philippians 3:10-11)

Like Paul, by the power of the Holy Spirit you can press on to obtain faith Christ. That is, strengthening your God given faith by receiving His gifts in Word and Sacrament, studying His Word, reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting His Word, that by the patience and comfort of God's holy Word, you may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life. Not because doing these because they earn you righteousness. No. You're righteous for the sake of Christ alone. But you press on to obtain Christ because Christ pressed on for you, suffering and dying on the cross in your stead so that He could make you His own.

On the one side, the parable of the wicked tenants is a severe pronouncement of God's judgment upon those who reject His grace. However, from the other side, you see how Jesus bore God's full judgment on your behalf. He is the Cornerstone upon which the vineyard of the Christian Church is built. By the grace of God, He enables and empowers all who believe in Christ Jesus to be good tenants of His vineyard. The Holy Spirit who called you to faith, working through Word and Sacrament, equips you for productive work in the vineyard so that you bear fruits of repentance, fruits of faith and righteousness, and perform acts of virtue and good works toward your neighbor.

The love your Savior has for you is love unknown, dying for the loveless and the undeserving, so that you might receive His rich inheritance of forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.