

**Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
8 October 2017**

Matthew 21:33-46

The climate was already tense. This itinerant preacher of whom they had heard so much had made a splash in the last few days. Several days ago he had made a grand entrance into town, like the proverbial “king on a donkey” of Zechariah 9:9, “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” As he rode his donkey he was welcomed by the people with great acclamation, as it was predicted by Isaiah 62:11, “The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.’”

Then, almost immediately, he went to the Temple and chased the vendors and money changers from their tables, in fulfillment of Psalm 69:9, “Zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.” After this, he walked around preaching and teaching and performing acts of wonder never seen before by the people. Just several days before, he cursed a fig tree for not producing fruit and the tree withered in the presence of all, as the crowds watched. Now, as he was preaching and teaching at the Temple, some Pharisees came to him and asked him about his powers and the authority under which he was doing what he did. Jesus had demanded an answer to a question of his own about the baptism of John and the Pharisees opposition to John. After this he began to teach in parables, directed at them.

The first of the parables was about a farmer who had two sons he sent to work on his vineyard. One said “No” but soon changed his mind and went. The second said “Yes” but later changed his mind and never went. He asked the audience about the son they thought had done the will of the father. It was at this point that they had begun to suspect there was an implicit criticism of them in his teachings. They had been “Yes” people, -very concerned with appearances, very formulaic in their worship, very obsessed with rituals- yet they were not doing the work their God wanted them to do. Prostitutes and Tax Collectors had at first walked away from God, but, now that they had come to know Jesus, many of them had accepted the news of Kingdom.

The next parable was even more direct. Jesus, the itinerant preacher, told them, “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.” This introduction to the story was a familiar scene to them. Share-croppers and tenant-farmers were common place in their world. The knew well that at harvest time the landowner would receive a percentage of the produce as payment for the use of the land. This was a sacred arrangement. No tenant farmer in t=his or her right mind would oppose payment to landowner. The law protected the owners, and a shame-and-honor culture demanded that proper respect be shown to them through payment of what was owed to them. But, as Jesus was telling the story, they began to suspect a different outcome.

Jesus continued, “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.” By this point they begin to feel righteous indignation. How

dare those tenants act in such a treacherous way? If this is a real case scenario Jesus is using, the law must be enforced and those tenants must be punished!

But, Jesus was not done with his story, "Again the landowner sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way." By this point, the Pharisees probably began to question the landowner's sanity or sense of honor. He should have sent armed guards, soldiers even, to take over the land by force and to punish those wicked tenants. His failure to act with a strong hand had just cost the lives of innocent servants and slaves. This was just too much! Hopefully, he learned his lesson with the second group of victimized messengers and he was ready to punish those criminal severely!

To their aggravation, Jesus was not done with his story. He continued, "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." The listening Pharisees are now beside themselves. They had never heard a story of such a weak landowner and such wicked tenants. They now begin to wonder where Jesus is going with this story. They are afraid to interrupt him, but they begin to suspect this story will have a negative ending. It is when Jesus asks them a question that they begin to see a possible outcome that could give them an opportunity to make themselves look good with the people listening to Jesus. The preacher asked, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" What a wonderful question! As teachers of the law, this was their opportunity to teach the people about the law's expectations.

They responded, almost in unison, "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." They were quite proud of this response. After all, they were the leaders of the people, and the crowds looked up to them for this type of guidance. They were a bit nervous when Jesus began to tell his story, but now they are quite happy they had an opportunity to instruct the people. But, then, Jesus asked them another question, "Have you 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'?" Of course they had heard of this passage and they had taught on it many times. They had the right answer and they were quite eager to explain the passage from the Psalm to the people.

Before they could answer, however, Jesus said, "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." What an outrage! He had been talking about them all along. He is accusing them of being the "Yes" son again, but this time is worse. He was accusing them of being wicked tenants. Not only were they failing to do God's will, they were killers, robbers, dishonorable people who failed to pay their loans. The worse thing of all is that Jesus made these criticisms in front of the crowds. This could create or increase animosity towards them. These types of injurious stories could cause them great problems with their constituents, students, temple worshippers, and power brokers in town.

Now that they, the chief priests and the Pharisees, had 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." They had suspected this preacher to be bad news for them for a while, but now they had proof. He calls himself the Son of God, he preaches a kingdom of love, grace, acceptance, and compassion, and, worse of all, he

claims to be the long-awaited Messiah they were all looking for. What a joke! How can this peasant, followed by this motley crew, be the liberator and savior they were waiting for?

They knew God is truly the owner of all that is because he is the Creator. They knew this! They needed this preacher to remind them of their duty towards God. Now he was accusing them of failing to give God what was owed to him. By this, of course, he means much more than a tithe or all the fees associated with the cultic sacrifices. By this he means giving God the honor, love, and respect due his name. By giving God his share, this preacher means that they must love their neighbors, even those considered uncleaned, impure, and dishonorable. People like tax collectors, prostitutes, and shepherds. People with all sorts of illnesses that render them unable to attend Temple. People who are outside of the law and, therefore, outside of God's love.

The Pharisees and Tax collectors went back to their offices and homes after this most unpleasant encounter with this Jesus of Galilee. They were of one mind and one spirit that they needed to get rid off this man. They began their plans in earnest, which ironically, would fulfill Jesus' prophesy regarding the rejected stone that becomes the chief cornerstone. Through their actions they will indeed become the wicked tenants who killed the Son of God, after their own ancestors had killed God's prophets in this same city of Jerusalem. Soon they would shed Jesus' blood on the same streets as the blood of so many other prophets had been shed.

Today's wicked farmers look very different than Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, yet many of the issues are just the same. Many of us refuse to accept that the vineyard belongs to the Lord and we are all tenant farmers. We believe it all belongs to us, we deserve it all, and there is no share God is owed. Yet, this world and all we possess, is ultimately God's vineyard, and we owe God the honor, love, respect, and gratitude he deserves. The tithing of time, talent, and treasure is our way of sharing with God in the work he is doing in our midst. With joyful and open hearts we acknowledge the sacred commission God has given us to go into his vineyard and we respond in obedience.

May God continue to bless us and may he give us the courage and love to share his harvest with those who are in need in our midst. Amen!