

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Transcribed from audio and may contain minor errors (livestream, 14:48).

Service video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AiBwBmJ-pE>

When I first looked at the readings for this Sunday, I thought to myself, "I've only been to a few vineyards in my life. I've never really seen what happens behind the scenes. Now, I've seen the finished product. I've visited vineyards at wineries where we tasted the fruit of the vine, the wine that had been worked over, poured, and given to us. But Jesus gives us a different picture of a vineyard. He doesn't give us the finished product, but he takes us behind the scenes.

A landowner plants a vineyard on fertile ground. He clears the stones. He plants choice vines. He builds a watchtower and prepares a winepress. He does everything necessary for the vineyard to bear good fruit. He even hires out tenants to gather the fruit when harvest time comes. And then, he waits. He waits and expects fruit. But when the harvest time comes, the vineyard doesn't produce what he expected. Even worse, the tenants refuse to give him the fruit.

And that is the picture that Jesus is giving for us today. See, God gives, but His people hoard. Hoard. God expects fruit, but His people refuse to give it. And yet, as we will see, this is not the end of the story, but only the beginning. Jesus tells this parable to the crowds, among whom are the chief priests and Pharisees, who are questioning Jesus' authority. By what authority are you doing these things? Who has given you power to do them, they say.

They've seen his miracles. They've heard his teaching. They've watched him heal the sick, restore sight to the blind, cast out demons, and proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God. And yet they reject him in their hearts. So Jesus tells them a familiar story to them about a vineyard. The master plants the vineyard and he leases it to his tenants. And when the harvest time comes, he sends his servants to collect the fruit. But the tenants say no. In fact, they beat one servant, kill another, and stone another.

These servants represent God's prophets, whom God sent to call his people back to him. Again and again and again, God's word was rejected by those tenants. And finally, the master says, I've had enough. I know what I will do. I will send my Son. And so he sends his Son. But when the tenants see him, they say, "Look, this is the heir. Come, let us kill him. We can have his inheritance." And so they take the Son outside the vineyard and kill him. To the astonishment of the chief priests and the Pharisees, Jesus is speaking about not only them, but what will happen

to himself.

The Son in the parable is Jesus. The vineyard in the parable belongs to God, Israel. And the tenants in the parable, well, they reject the Son. But Jesus' parable doesn't end with the death of the Son. It ends, rather, with the stone. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The rejected Son then becomes the cornerstone. The one whom those sinful tenants cast aside becomes the very foundation for salvation. And now the parable turns toward us.

Because the problem of the tenants isn't only that they denied God's servants. They had a deeper problem. They wanted the vineyard without the Master of the vineyard. They wanted the gifts without the Giver. And don't we do the same thing? In our daily lives, God has given us everything we possibly need: food, drink, house, home, family, friends, work, and possessions. He's given us His Word. He's given us baptism. He's given us the Lord's Supper. He's even given us the very Gospel, good news of Jesus Christ.

But our sinful hearts are constantly tempted and say, "These gifts, they belong to me and only me." We want God's gifts without wanting God himself. This even happens with the gospel we receive: the good news of Christ. And then we are tempted to keep it for ourselves. Someone else can tell them about Jesus. We think it's not my responsibility to share the faith at school or at work. Someone else can do that. This may take forms even here at St. Paul's. Why come to church when it's streaming online?

Why come to Sunday school or Bible class when I can read my Bible at home? Does confirmation class really matter that much? The ugly truth is this. Our sinful hearts are soiled with selfishness and greed. We hide the fruit. We hoard the fruit. We don't even want to share the fruit. And the reason is simple. We are those sinful tenants who want to be masters of a vineyard that never actually belonged to us. Paul understood this temptation. We read about his life in the epistle lesson.

Paul had every reason by human standards to boast about himself. Circumcised on the eighth day, an Israelite, a Pharisee, zealous for his religion. By the standards of his former life, he had quite an impressive record. But Paul says that all of it is loss compared to knowing Christ Jesus. His righteousness could not save him. His accomplishments could not save him. His religious credentials could not save Paul. Only Christ could save him. Only Christ can save us.

And so, dear friends, in Christ, the most important picture in this parable is not the vineyard. It's not the wicked tenants. It's not even the fruit. It's the Son. The Father who sends His Son into the vineyard knowing full well what would happen. The Son is rejected, driven outside the vineyard and killed. Jesus is the Son who goes to the cross. And there, the one whom sinners

reject becomes the cornerstone of salvation. He doesn't go to the cross because we've produced enough fruit.

He doesn't go to the cross because we were faithful enough. He doesn't even go to the cross because we gave God what He was owed. No. God sent Jesus to the cross because He loves us. And on the cross, the kingdom of God is given to you, to sinners like you and me. The cornerstone was rejected so that sinners could be built upon Christ and His steadfast love for us. And this is where the gospel becomes so wonderfully concrete this morning. Christ doesn't really tell you that the kingdom of God is yours. He actually delivers His kingdom to you. In holy baptism God the Father made you a member of His kingdom and He gives you forgiveness of sins, rescues you from death and the devil, and gives you eternal salvation to all who believe. At the Lord's Supper, Christ gives you His own body and blood to eat and drink for the forgiveness of your sins, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, loud and magnifying His glorious name and His kingdom. The fruit of Christ's sacrifice is not something you have to manufacture for yourself; it is something that He freely gives, and you only need to receive it by faith. And this is why Paul can say that everything else is rubbish compared to knowing Christ. Everything that we have accomplished, everything that we have earned, everything we might boast about none of it compares to Christ Himself. The rejected stone has become the cornerstone of your salvation.

The Son who was killed has become your Savior. And the Kingdom of God is given to you by faith. Now, what does God do with people who have received his gifts? He makes them fruitful. But neither the fruit that they produce, nor their fruitfulness earns them the Kingdom. But the Kingdom of God has already come because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Think a moment and think about a garden. This may be a garden you have from your childhood. Just any garden.

At my parents' house, my father always had a garden. Every year around April or May, he would plant seeds. By late August or early October, around this time, it was time for harvest. One year we decided, let's plant some blackberries. We had raspberries already in our garden. Let's try out blackberries. But the blackberries didn't grow where we wanted them to grow. They were choked out. And because of that, their growth was stunted. And he was about ready to give up. But then the next season, to our utter and joyful surprise, blackberries appeared. But not in the place where we expected. In a completely different place. And they grew and produced so much fruit that we had left over for the rest of the year.

A dad had a theory about how those blackberries got there. He figured a bird had eaten the blackberry and he had left the seed behind and the new growth shot up from there. Now,

whether or not that actually happened, the point remains. The seed went somewhere we didn't expect and eventually it bore fruit. And that is exactly what God does with the gospel. He takes the seed of his word and he plants it in places that we may never expect. He plants through you. He plants through your words. He plants it through your acts of love and service. He works through the ordinary vocation that he has given you. So that you may bear much fruit. You may not know where God will make that seed grow. You may not know what a word about Christ might mean to a co-worker. You may not know what your kindness might mean to your neighbor. You may not even know what the confession of faith means to a family member.

But you do know this. The fruit of faith that you produce belongs to the Lord. And by His grace, the fruit is His to give, not only to you, but through you. And we don't bear His fruit to make God love us. We bear fruit because God already has loved us in Christ. We don't serve our neighbors to earn salvation. We serve our neighbors because Christ gives us salvation. We don't share the gospel because we are trying to build God's kingdom by our own strength. We share the gospel because the King has already come in Christ, and His kingdom is now established among you and given to you by faith.

And so, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, there's one thing I want you to remember from this sermon. We hoard, but Christ gives. And by faith in Him, we bear fruit. We hoard God's gifts because we're sinners. But Christ gives His life for sinners. Christ gives His faith and His kingdom for sinners. He gives His body and His blood for sinners. But He makes us sinners fruitful by faith. And so the Lord's labor is never in vain. He works to kill the tyranny of your sin and instead bears fruit through you by His grace through faith in Him.

Because of this, you may face suffering in this life. You may be rejected because of your faith. You may experience hardship, persecution, loss, and grief. But Christ remains your cornerstone. The foundation can never be moved. Your salvation doesn't depend on how impressive your fruit looks, but upon Christ. The Son who was rejected has become the cornerstone. The one who was crucified is now risen from the dead. And the one who gives himself for you now gives his kingdom to all of you so that you too will rise from death to eternal life.

And so receive His gifts this morning. Trust in His promises and then go into the vineyard and bear the fruits of faith. Love your neighbor. Serve those whom God has placed around you. Speak the good news of Jesus whenever you have an opportunity. Let the fruit that Christ has produced in you be given away, because the vineyard belongs to Him, the fruit belongs to Him, and the kingdom belongs to Him. But through faith in Jesus Christ, by God's grace, all of it is shared with you.

And so go then into His vineyard. Bear the fruit for the Lord. Walk in the love of Christ. Live in the peace of God, and rejoice that the rejected stone has become the cornerstone of your salvation. Go in peace. Amen. And I may the peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and your lives in faith in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.