

“By Our Fruits”

Matthew 21:33-46

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Matthew 21:33-46

“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. 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. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 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.

Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They 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.”

Jesus 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’? 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.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees 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.

Prayer.

The kingdom of God will be taken
away from you
and given to a people that produces
the fruits of the kingdom.
Now that’s a bucket of cold water
smack in the face!

In our Gospel lesson for this
morning,
Jesus faces a dilemma:
speak the truth and be prematurely
imprisoned,
or speak in allegory,
with just enough blurring,
to convey the truth to an eager
crowd,

but without supplying incriminating evidence.
Allegory wins.

Jesus allegorizes a passage from Isaiah.¹
The good prophet Isaiah uses the occasion of a harvest festival to stand on a chair and bring the party to a screeching halt.
He sees the enemy soldiers at the city gate, yet, here he is in the mist of a festival, filled with farmers and their friends partying in denial.
What's wrong with this story? He asks.
He proclaims ruin upon an unfaithful people.
Listen to how Isaiah warms them first, brings them in, then springs God's judgment upon them:

*Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his
vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watch-tower in the midst of
it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.*

*And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.
What more was there to do for my
vineyard*

¹ Isaiah 5:1-6

*that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?*

*And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with
briers and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.*

Five hundred years later, Jesus draws deep from this rich prophetic well
- So thoroughly known by the religious authorities and crowds of his day-
And builds upon the words of Isaiah to make his message: to proclaim judgment upon Jewish religious authority for their unfaithful behavior.
Jesus advances the story with his own twists; his own flair; his own additions.

The allegory is obvious: The vineyard became Israel; the vinedressers, its religious leaders; the successive emissaries, the Old Testament prophets; the son, Jesus the Messiah; his murder, the crucifixion.

“See,” Jesus says, “how these vinedressers stopped at nothing. They even murdered the heir to get

hold of the vineyard. You must be just as resolute in laying hold of the kingdom of God!"²

Jesus asks: "what will the owner do to the tenants when he comes?"
The religious authorities supply the answer to Jesus' question.
They open their mouths before they think, they insert their foot.
They speak the truth, which hasn't been their party line.
(Thank goodness they were not facing off with Jesus in a presidential debate!)
"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."
To Jesus goes game, set, and match.

Citing the Psalmist³
Jesus proclaims his contemporary Word,
The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.
I am the one you reject,
He tells them in so many words.
I am the son of the Father you are planning to murder.
He turns to the crowds and says,
I am stronger than other stones.
Interlock yourself with me

² *Reginald H. Fuller, as found at:*
http://liturgy.slu.edu/27OrdA100508/tneword_indepth.html

³ Psalm 118:22

And together we will be a stronger corner.

Turning again to the Jewish authorities, he says,
But you lawyers of legalism, Practitioners, priests and pastors producing pain,
If you act with the expectation of tomorrow's decline
Based on a tradition of yesterday's dry, dusty, uninspired, institutional faith
Then, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom.

The crowd, tasting the potential of a new day for faith, erupt in cheers!

Doing it the same old way
With the same old excuse of "that's how we've always done it before"
Will lead us to the same old ruin,
And the first to recognize this is Jesus.
If it isn't working, prune it!
If it's not growing, cut it down.
Jesus is expecting nothing but fruits for the kingdom, and he isn't settling for anything less.
Jesus gets it 2,000 years ago; I don't understand why it is so hard for us to understand it today.
Is it the fact that we fundamentally do not like to change and grow?
Is it the fact that we might have to risk, and yes, sometimes fail?
Is it the fact that we don't want to have to be creative, we'd just rather take the easy way out and say, "just make it simple: tell me what to do"?

The kingdom is given to people who produce.

It is that simple.

Produce according to your ability, but produce.

Produce according to the skills that God has given you, and by God's grace, by what you've been able to grow and develop, but produce.

In the academic world, the phrase is, "publish or perish."

In the marketplace, it's make a profit or go out of business.

In the world of faith, Jesus is telling us "bear fruits for the kingdom, or else it will be taken away from you."

Today we bring forward three symbols of our fruits to this communion table:

We make a sacrifice and dig deep into our pocketbooks. I know, each of us would rather spend it on ourselves, our kids, or our grandchildren.

But, it isn't a sacrifice, unless it hurts, unless it's missed.

We had to make a sacrifice to earn it, and now, it's a sacrifice to let it go.

Our money is a gift for the work of ministry, doing the will of Christ.

Allow our stewardship of money be the fruit we offer for the kingdom.

We bring forward the bread, the loaf, the Body of Christ.

We share of one loaf, lifted high as a symbol of Christ's body, the gift of his life for us.

We harvest the grain, grind it into flour, mix it with yeast, kneed it, let it

rise, bake it, and return the gift back to God.

The bread is the fruit of our labor, the result of our occupations, the fact that we've decided that the Body of Christ is worth our sweat, our tired and aching bodies. We're here with this bread because it is important to our faith, one loaf, one Body, one Lord of all.

We lift high the fruit of the vine.

Like the bread, it didn't just appear. The grapes were grown from a vine, harvested, crushed, processed, aged, bottled, and brought forward this morning.

We assemble to do as Christ taught us: "to eat this bread and to drink this wine in remembrance of me."

By our fruits, we are known.

If we're just talk and coffee, it would be better if we hadn't even bothered.

The fruits the heavenly Father has given to us would be taken away and given to another, someone who is more worthy, who is willing to produce for the kingdom.

Then where would we be?

Then where would we be?

Bare fruits worthy of the kingdom.

Bring them forward in Holy Communion with our Lord.

Amen.