

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro]

What people say about Jesus tells a lot about that person. Some say: "Jesus was just a miracle worker." Others say: "Jesus was just another prophet among the prophets." Even others: "Jesus was a man who hung out with sinners, so I'm comfortable in my sin." Who is Jesus?

As C.S. Lewis has famously said, Jesus "is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion which undermines the whole mind of man." Lewis also said Jesus "produced mainly three effects – Hatred – Terror – Adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval." So, Jesus is either God, a lunatic, or an evil man. Who is Jesus? Today on this, the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Jesus proclaims to His hearers on who He truly is.

Just prior to today's Gospel text, the Jewish religious establishment challenged the authority of Jesus, saying: "***Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who is it that gave you this authority?***" (Luke 20:2). You see, according to Jewish Law, the chief priests, scribes, and elders had divine appointment. So, they ask Jesus, where does your authority come from?

This question is what leads Jesus into telling the Parable of the Wicked Tenants to the people – those who believe Jesus' teaching and to the Jewish religious establishment who rejected His teaching.

[The Parable of the Wicked Tenants]

Jesus began the parable saying: "***A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while***" (Luke 20:9b).

From the start, we see a vineyard. Now, what does a vineyard require? For sure, time and patience. For a vineyard to produce quality wine, it takes months or even years. So, each vineyard requires tender loving care. We also see that the owner of the vineyard is trusting His tenants to keep producing the fruit needed to make quality wine.

But when the time came to receive some of the fruit of His vineyard, the tenants would not give back what belonged to Him. Instead, ***“the tenants beat [His servant] and sent him away empty-handed”*** (Luke 20:10b). But the owner of the vineyard is patient as He keeps sending servants. But with each servant, they receive the same rejection. Now, each servant represents God’s prophetic activity during the Old Testament times, when the prophets called people to repent and to show fruits of repentance, but that call fell so often on deaf ears. Instead, these servants are beaten and sent away (Luke 20:10); beaten, treated shamefully, and sent away (20:11); and wounded and thrown out (20:12).

Eventually, the owner of the vineyard hoping against hope says, ***“What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him”*** (Luke 20:13).

Now, for some in the audience, this should have perked their ears. You see, Peter, James, and John have heard this before. By “this,” I mean *“beloved Son.”* For them, a lightbulb should have gone off, since they previously heard the voice from heaven proclaim about Jesus: ***“This is my beloved Son, listen to Him”*** (Luke 9:35). But for the others in the audience who weren’t on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus would explain the meaning of the parable.

You see, the preparatory catechesis is over. The prophets accomplished what God sent them to do, but now it is time for God’s own Son to visit the vineyard. But the abuse suffered by all of God’s servants will fall upon His own beloved Son so this Scripture would be fulfilled: ***“The reproaches of those who reproached you fell upon Me”*** (Psalm 69:9; Romans 15:3). So, it is the hour for the Son to be killed.

The tenants say: ***“This is the heir. Let us kill Him, so that the inheritance may be ours”*** (Luke 20:14). So, they threw Him out of the vineyard and killed Him. This is Jesus also predicting His own death outside the Jerusalem walls. The wicked tenants wanted the vineyard all to themselves. They assumed that the vineyard would be theirs due to the owner’s absence.

[The Rejection of the Stone]

The meaning of the parable is clear. Jesus is talking about Himself! It’s all about Him! But, at this point, He breaks off the parable and interprets the significance of His own death for salvation history. He asks, ***“What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others”*** (Luke 20:15-16). Here, Jesus echoes Isaiah: the fruitless vineyard that has become a thicket of thorns must be destroyed (Isaiah 5:5-6). Equally clear is Jesus’ own answer to His question: ***“He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others”*** (Luke 20:16).

Since the Jewish religious establishment are unable to be good stewards of God's vineyard, God the Father – *the owner of the vineyard* – will give the vineyard to tenants who would care for the vineyard. These new tenants would begin with the Twelve Apostles who, through their commission, reconstitute the Church as the New Israel.

When the Jewish religious establishment heard this, they respond in fear saying, ***“Surely not!”*** (Luke 20:16). You see, the killing of the Son, the killing of the wicked tenants, and the transfer of the vineyard to others must happen.

The audience wants to know the end of the story, but do they? Do they really want to know how this ends? Knowing this, Jesus asks them in the form of a question, ***“What then is this that is written:***

‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’?
Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him” (Luke 20:17-18).

For everyone there, they knew exactly what Jesus was saying, for they were familiar with this Jewish proverb: *“If a stone falls on the pot, woe to the pot. If the pot falls on the stone, woe to the pot. Either way, woe to the pot!”* The stone always destroys the pot.

Jesus speaks the question, but He gives no answer, because the events of the next few days will provide that answer. But the people and the Jewish religious establishment already have had the answer for a long time in the Scriptures. They should have known that according to Moses and all the prophets, it was ***“necessary that the Christ suffer these things and enter into His glory”*** (Luke 24:26).

This is what must happen to all the prophets. However, the rejection of this Prophet – *Jesus* – is different. What is so extraordinary about Jesus' imminent crucifixion is that His rejection is the means by which He will become the cornerstone and is therefore a reference to His glory! So, by the stone's rejection by the builders – *the Jewish religious establishment* – is the stone's exaltation as the head of the corner.

The coming crucifixion of Jesus will become the ultimate stumbling block for all people as St. Paul was inspired to write: ***“We preach Christ crucified – a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles”*** (1 Corinthians 1:23).

[The Tenants Today]

So, what does this Parable mean for us today? That was then, what about now?

We now live in the time of the Church, since Jesus has risen from the dead and has bodily ascended into heaven. So, who are the stewards until Christ returns on the Last Day? We are.

When looking at this parable today, we see Jesus letting the vineyard to us. His servants are faithful pastors who preach Christ's saving Word of Law and Gospel. And as it was then, is now, many of these faithful pastors today are treated shamefully by today's tenants who would rather hear what their itching ears desire (2 Timothy 4:3), instead of God's unchanging truth, for He is *"the same yesterday and today and forever"* (Hebrews 13:8).

Christianity has always been about Jesus. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Jesus is the entire reason the Christian Church exists to this very day and very hour and we are His stewards. So, let us not fall into the mindset of the wicked tenants in the parable who claimed the vineyard for themselves. You see, everything we have is only by God's grace and favor. So, we cannot claim the paycheck we receive as our own doing, in fact, that paycheck is a gift from God. Remember, it is God alone who provides for all our needs of body – food, clothing, shelter, and the like – and for our soul – the forgiveness of our sins – so it is our vocation to give back what God asks of us: the fruits of our faith: repentant hearts, and our time, talents, and treasure.

Likewise, when a church wavers from its commitment to the confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world, it takes the place of the wicked tenants. You see, the most important question Jesus asked His followers was this: *"Who do you say that I am?"* (Luke 9:20). Since Christ has ascended to the Right Hand of the Father, numerous Christian denominations have walked away from their confidence in the trustworthiness of God's Word as revealed in the Scriptures. As a result, they are no longer comfortable with the teachings of Jesus and have become the wicked tenants in believing they own the vineyard. But the fact remains that Christianity is all about Jesus and He will come again.

Jesus is the Truth. So, anything that conflicts with the truth of God's Word, that is a lie. The truth of Christ is objectively true. It is truth aside from how we may feel about it. The truth of Christ does not rest on the shaky foundation of human feeling, emotion, or opinion, for He is the cornerstone.

In ancient times, the cornerstone was used at a building's corner to bear the weight or stress of the two walls. So, if that stone would be removed, the entire structure would fall. So, upon Jesus rests the entire structure of God's kingdom.

[The Stone Gives Life]

Jesus is the Stone and He says that everyone will either be broken or crushed. By everyone, Jesus means everyone. We will all be crushed.

For even the most devout follower of Christ must fall into the brokenness of repentance in order to be raised again as new beings, as living stones in Christ, the temple of God. As poor, miserable sinners, all of us, no doubt, have had this experience. We have fallen on that Stone and have been broken. Christ has pulled us up short and stopped us in our path. Through faith in Christ, he has humbled us as He leads us to confess our sin to God and to the neighbor we wronged. He has caused us to see the shoddiness of our thinking and the ugliness of our living. His Word that is ***“sharper than any two-edged sword”*** (Hebrews 4:12), cuts us to the core. But Christ picks us up. And, oh, the bliss of recovery under His gentle care! What we first regarded as a degree of punishment turns out to be the first step in the healing process as He forgives all repentant sinners. Thus, there is Gospel in what appears to be entirely Law.

But upon those who refuse to trust in Jesus as their Lord comes the crushing blow of judgment. Those who stumble over Jesus will receive the judgment caused by their rejection of Him, and when the stone falls on them, they will be utterly crushed and grounded into powder. You see, although God has a love and patience beyond the farthest reaches of our imagination, God teaches us in His Word with the possibility that one can spurn God once too often. We are reminded that with the assurances of God’s love, that ***“our God is a consuming fire”*** (Hebrews 12:29).

So, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants tells us not only of God’s judgments, but also tells of God’s love and patience. He sends and sends – and keeps on sending. Finally, He sends His Son – His beloved Son. We do right to perceive that the parable is spoken against us. But we do wrong if that’s all we perceive. We need to perceive also that the parable is spoken for us as a word of hope, that it tells us of a God who keeps on sending in our behalf and even goes as far as to send His own beloved Son for our salvation! No one could take Jesus’ life away from Him, only He can lay down His life, so that He may take it up again (John 10:17).

So, who is Jesus? He is the very Lamb of God who put His face toward Jerusalem in order to suffer and die on a cross, so that He would win for all who cling to Him the vineyard, which is the Church, the place of joy, and from the fruit comes the sweet wine of His Means of Grace – *His undeserved forgiveness in Word and Sacrament* – and the joy of salvation. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep you hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠