### “Give Him the Produce” Steve Finlan for The First Church, October 8, 2023

**Matthew 21:33–46**

33“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 watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37Finally he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” 38But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” 39So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41They 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.”

42 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’? 43Therefore 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. 44The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Welcome, everyone, to First Church. The seasons may be changing but what is not changing is our welcome to all of you here at our church.

Today our passage features a parable from Jesus. Jesus was a great teacher. A good teacher finds a way to connect through lessons. People in Jerusalem were well acquainted with agriculture, specifically grape growing. So when Jesus chose a parable about a vineyard, he knew his audience would be familiar with the basics in this story.

What is most strikingly clear, to me, from this parable is that the vineyard owner did not send his son in order to get him killed. You have to look near the beginning to see what was the purpose for sending first the servants and then the son. It says they were sent “to collect his produce” (Matt 21:34). Just as the vineyard owner has a right to expect his tenant farmers to hand over some produce, so also does God have the right to expect some spiritual progress from the religious community. Fruit is always a metaphor, in Jesus’ teaching, for the production of spiritual results. God sent the prophets, and then his Son, in order to bring about spiritual growth in the human race. In the metaphorical story, seeing spiritual progress is pictured as collecting some produce. Life’s great purpose, life’s great meaning is spiritual progress.

In the story, the sending of the prophets, and then the Son, has nothing to do with violence, with sacrificial death, or with paying some kind of penalty for human sin. These ideas were attached to Jesus’ life purpose by various disciples; they simply don’t appear in Jesus’ own story. The servants and then the son wanted to be collectors of produce, wanted to help bring about spiritual progress. Jesus was unable to see any progress at all among the priests, the Sadducees, although there was some progress among the Pharisees. Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Saul of Tarsus are just three of the Pharisees who showed spiritual receptivity.

The Pharisees were not priests but members of a religious party, sort of like a political party, but a religious movement that took the rules and rituals of the Bible ultra-seriously.

It says here that “the chief priests and the Pharisees” perceived that the parable was spoken about them (21:45), but I think it really focuses on the priests. The image of the priests as tenant farmers occurs in some other Jewish writings. *None* of the priests were receptive to Jesus’ message, and only a small minority of the Pharisees were. Both groups were too attached to hardened theological positions.

The parable also gives a brief and depressing summary of the whole history of the priesthood’s reception of prophets, who were usually mistreated and beaten, or even killed. Notice that the vineyard owner assumes that they will respect his son, that the importance and status of the son will be recognized. It is shocking that he was not honored. It is scandalous and disastrous what the priests did to Jesus. This was not God’s will. The killing of the Son was not in any way necessary. It was not at all what God intended. The tenant farmers, who stand for the priests, are a disappointing and criminal lot.

So, how can *we* be loyal and useful tenant farmers, instead of greedy and violent ones? Well, part of the answer is in the question: don’t be greedy, don’t grasp for power, and don’t be violent. Take seriously the assignment of being an ambassador of Jesus in this world. What a tremendous adventure awaits! You represent him, so you must be responsible and ethical. Remember what is most important, which are the spiritual values and principles by which we live and which are eternally real: truth, beauty, goodness, unity and love. As you seek for these and embody them in your life, you are being a faithful servant, a good farmer who produces healthy fruit. In this harvest season, reflect upon examples of spiritual fruit in your life.

At the end of our passage we find that Jesus mixes his metaphors. He speaks of himself as a stone that was rejected, but which is to become the cornerstone of a new building. That means he will become the foundation of a new community. He returns to the original metaphor, saying that the kingdom will be taken away and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. Of course, fruits means spiritual results. Going back to the stone metaphor, he says that those who stumble on this stone will be broken. Those who can’t handle who Jesus is, will be wounded by their own ignorance.

Those who *do* recognize the Messiahship or the Sonship of Jesus are those who will bear fruit. And they are those who know *which* stone is the cornerstone. They will be able to use the cornerstone as the foundation of their journey of spiritual progress. They will also know upon whom the church is built, and they know who keeps watch over the vineyard, looking for healthy fruit. Let Jesus guide you as you take steps to bring about spiritual growth and spiritual fruit in your life, and to share these joys with those around you. May the harvest be bountiful!