“***To Collect His Produce***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Oct. 4, 2020

**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.

This is one of Jesus’ longest and most important parables. It is not complicated or difficult, and yet one of its crucial points is often overlooked. It’s crucial because Jesus is telling us why he was sent to earth. Let’s get the basics about the characters. The landlord in the parable stands for God; the slaves whom he sends to the vineyard are the prophets; the tenant farmers who take care of the vineyard are the priests. The vineyard owner’s son is Jesus himself.

Now the overlooked part of the parable is the *purpose* for which the slaves and the son are sent; they are sent to “collect his produce” (21:34). Repeatedly in Jesus’ preaching, produce or fruit stands for spiritual growth. In Mark 4 he speaks of the kingdom being like a plant that grows overnight, from the “stalk” to the “head” to the “full grain” (4:28), which speaks for the fact that spiritual growth takes place in *stages*. Elsewhere he will emphasize the *quality* of the growth, as when he says “you will know them by their fruits. . . every good tree bears good fruit” (Matt 7:16–17). Or he may promise an *abundance* of growth, as when he speaks of the mustard seed or of good seed yielding a harvest of a hundredfold (Mark 4:31–32; Matt 13:8, 23). The picture of fruit growing is Jesus’ favorite image for spiritual growth. The produce of which he speaks in this parable is the same as the fruits of which he speaks elsewhere. He is saying that the vineyard owner sent his servants to the vineyard in order to collect some spiritual growth. Unfortunately, these servants were beaten and rejected, and some killed, by the tenant farmers. This refers to Israel’s rejection of many of its prophets.

So the vineyard owner determines to send his son, figuring that the farmers will have to respect the owner’s son. Instead, they conspire to kill the son. And so, the vineyard must be taken away and given “to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time” (Matt 21:41). This seems to mean the spiritual message will be taken away from the Jewish leaders and handed over to Gentiles to take care of. This is the aspect that scholars usually point out, often overlooking the fundamental purpose of the son’s visit, which is spiritual fruition. Both points are emphasized when Jesus says the vineyard will be “given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom” (21:43). The whole project has to do with producing spiritual fruits. That was God’s plan in the Old Testament period, and it was God’s purpose in sending Jesus, who is the greatest facilitator of spiritual growth.

Notice that the son was not sent in order to be killed, but was sent in order to foster the collection of fruit—of spiritual results. That is what God’s project is all about. Jesus came to reveal God to us, and to assist us in learning how to bear spiritual fruit. That is also what the Spirit within us endeavors to teach us, even now. God’s project is to help us to grow spiritually. It is not primarily about sin, much less a payment for sin. This parable simply does not support the idea that the Son was sent to die, or to function as a substitute or a sacrifice. He was sent to “collect his produce” (21:34). The killing of the son was an unnecessary, unwanted, and terrible tragedy. The people who did that were grasping for power; they said “let us kill him and get his inheritance” (21:38).

The irony is that the stone that was rejected—Jesus himself—has become the cornerstone of a new structure, the fellowship of the kingdom. We should value the heroism and selflessness of Jesus, who allowed himself to be killed, and who worried about the painful effect this would have on his disciples more than he worried about himself, but we need not distort the divine purpose by justifying this unjustifiable act of violence, or rationalizing the irrational fear that motivated the killing. It was humans, not God, who committed this violence. It is humans, not God, who seek to bargain for salvation, when, in fact, salvation is freely offered to all the pure in heart.

There is nothing in the parable—or in Jesus’ teaching—about some complicated plan to pay for sin through violence suffered. The vineyard owner’s plan was much simpler and more straightforward. Go and collect some of the produce. Jesus is still collecting whatever spiritual produce there is, because that is what God does. God preserves and uplifts all spiritual growth. What God and the Son are interested in is the health of the vineyard. Let us trust in the sensible and non-violent plan of God. It has to do with endless growth, learning, and spiritual perfecting. That is God’s work in the world and in our lives, both here and hereafter. When we treasure goodness and truth, which allows spiritual growth to take place, then we are cultivating the vineyard. Those who are good tenant farmers will find that they themselves are growing. Really, *we* are the plants in the vineyard. Bearing fruit is the whole point. And it is our spiritual reward, as well. Growth is fulfilling. Growth is meaningful.

Let us be good farmers here, providing the conditions for growth to occur. We can’t make the growth occur, but we can provide the conditions. Let God grow you. God *will* grow you if you don’t block that growth with greed, revenge, or dishonesty. Read what the Bible says about bearing fruit, and about the fruit of the spirit. Have these truths in your minds, so that you anticipate good things. Have an ear to hear. Hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt 5:6). God will stimulate the nutrients and ensure the growth.