

Sermon on Matthew 21:33-46 – 10/1/11 *Condemn Thyself?*

Grace and peace to all of you from Christ our Lord and our Heavenly Father. Amen

How many of you have been with a group of friends where they're talking about someone that sounds really familiar – you join the conversation in the middle of it so you don't really know who they are talking about, the conversation ends and then everyone ends up looking at you. You wonder to yourself, "I wonder who they were talking about...wait a second, they're talking about me." I can remember one time where this happened to me – and it's not always the most pleasant feeling. But I have to admit, sometimes I'll do this – I'll talk about "Jack" to "Jack's" face, but I won't mention "Jack's" name," until they figure out that all the while I've been talking about them. This is something that Christ did in this parable we just heard – he talks about these chief priests and elders, the tenants working in the vineyard – but lets them figure out who He was talking about in the end. As the end of our reading says, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them." These guys were the "butt of the joke" if you will. However, I don't want to focus so much on why these chief priests and Pharisees were on the tail end of the parables. What I do want to focus on, however, is how we can see ourselves in those parables. What I do want to focus on is why this Jesus fellow, ultimately, wants to crush us to smithereens, get us to condemn ourselves, so that he can give us new life, true life, in relation to God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let's walk through the passage. Like all the other parables, it's helpful to see who the characters are. First we have the landowner who, if you notice does all the hard work – he planted the vineyard, he put a fence around it to protect it from animals, he put a wine press to make wine of course, and he builds a watchtower to keep the tenants safe at the vineyard, so that they could see

trouble coming from far away. Then we have tenants (*georgos*) that the landowner employed to work at this vineyard. Soon after this we see that the landowner wants the fruit of the land because it's harvest time. These tenants, of course, don't think they really need to give up anything – after all, they did all the hard work didn't they? They pruned the grapevines, they took care of everything while this landowner was far away. Why should other people enjoy all the hard work they did? So then we see the landowner send 3 slaves – one gets beaten up, one gets pelted with rocks, the other one is simply killed. So the landowner sends another entourage of slaves, and the same thing happens to them. Finally, the landowner does something that might not seem like the smartest thing to do; he sends his son, assuming that the tenants will respect the son. Of course, we all know what happens – the son comes to his father's vineyard, the tenants not only kill the son, but they toss him out of the vineyard. And listen to the tenants words again. They say, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.”

After this parable, Jesus asks a very simple question – “When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” Of course these learned priests and Pharisees know the answer, and I just love the language of their answer – “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.”

So what you see here is these priests and Pharisees condemning themselves. This whole parable, and the last few parables we heard over the last few weeks were all about them. Like I hinted at the beginning, here is Jesus talking about people right in front of their face to expose them for the things they've done and will do. And when we do something like that, when I do something like that, that's usually why I do it – to get the other person to notice something about themselves

that they might not be seeing, but is plain as day to me. And this, interestingly, is what Jesus wanted them to do – to condemn themselves to see the error of their way. Jesus wanted them to condemn themselves because, especially as people who have struggled with addiction know, you need to figure out that you are rock bottom before you can start to piece your life together. You need to be in total darkness before you can start to appreciate the light.

So what happens if we turn this parable on ourselves? What if we envision ourselves as those same tenants – and this is something we do focus on, especially during Lent. What if, like those wicked tenants, like those priests and Pharisees, we need to hear this parable and in a very real sense condemn ourselves? What if we need to be crushed by the stone that has been rejected by so many? What if we need to be broken into pieces by this same stone, this same Jesus so that he can put us back together more whole than before?

To be crushed by Christ, to condemn ourselves can be a bitter pill to swallow. After all, many of us may think we're really not that bad, at least not as bad as those guys in the parable who beat, stoned, and killed, or perhaps like those people we see on TV. Then again, there might be others here who already feel the weight of their sin, of other people judging them, and they don't need to be told to condemn themselves because they already have, and do it daily.

Let me give you an example of being crushed by Christ, of condemning thyself. Because there can be a healthy way to do and an unhealthy way to. This was a meditation written by a Lutheran pastor back in the early 1600's named Johann Gerhard. (Goes to show that everything old is not bad, and everything new is not necessarily that good!) He writes,

“God, whom I am unable to deceive, the most severe judge and the most powerful executioner of his own eternal law, accuses me. He is wisdom itself. From him I am unable to flee. He certainly powerfully reigns everywhere. To where then can I flee (Psalm 139:7)? To you, O pious Christ, our sole Redeemer and Savior, I can flee. Great are my debts, but greater is your payment. Great is my unrighteousness, but greater is your righteousness. I acknowledge. Please ignore. I open what is closed. Please shut. I uncover. Please cover. I appeal from the throne of justice to the throne of mercy, in order that I may not come into the condemnation that I greatly deserve. This is on account of your most holy merit, which has been placed between your condemnation and myself. In me there is nothing except damnable sin. In you there is nothing except saving merit. I have committed many things on account of which I am most rightly deserve to be damned. You, however, have not left anything undone by which you may mercifully save me. I hear the voice in the Song, which urges me to hide in the clefts of the rock (Song of Solomon 2:14). You are the strongest rock. The clefts of the rock are your wounds (1 Corinthians 10:4). In them, I may hide myself from the accusations of all of creation. My sins cry to heaven, but your blood shed for my sins cries louder (Hebrews 12:24). My sins are persuasive, so that my heart ought to be accused by God, but your passion in my stead is more persuasive, so that I will be defended. My unrighteous life is powerful enough that I ought to be damned, but your righteous life is more powerful, so that I am going to be saved.”

(From <http://www.forministry.com/CAONLCHCAGKLGK/SacredMeditations.dsp>)

In that meditation you heard two things – the Christian condemning himself, but also the Christian remembering the mercy of God shown to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. It is holding those two in tension which is the trick. If we condemn ourselves too much, we fall into a pit of despair. If we only remember the promises of Christ and what Christ has done, we can forget or neglect why Christ came to die in the first place – for us, for me, for you because we stand condemned and guilty.

So this parable invites us into this tension – standing condemned, being responsible for the death of the Son but also standing in the freedom God provides through the blood of the cross, through the inheritance we receive from the death of the Son, even though we are responsible for the death of the Son. So what is this freedom? What is this inheritance? Psalm 80 calls it restoration. Gerhard calls it salvation. Christ calls it being given the kingdom of God. Amen.