

Pentecost 18 / October 4, 2020

Matthew 21:43

“Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.”

Have you had anything taken away from you? There was a reality show on television about repossession companies and the various ways they retrieved property from people who were unwilling or unable to make their payments. Sometimes our economic situation changes and we have to return property or possessions, because we can no longer afford to pay for them. Have you ever had anything taken away from you, because you were using it improperly? Perhaps when you were a teenager your parents took the car away, because they noticed strips of rubber missing from the tires and surmised you were misusing their vehicle. Jesus' parable of the vineyard was a warning to the religious leaders of Jerusalem that they were about to lose their place in God's kingdom and have their authority taken from them. It was sort of like getting a letter from the bank threatening to foreclose or a notice from your parents warning you that if you didn't change your driving habits, they would change them for you by taking the car away from you.

Jesus spoke this parable against the religious leaders of Jerusalem in particular and of Israel in general, because God had entrusted them with the care of His people. The Sadducees controlled the temple and were responsible to see that it was a place of prayer and sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus complained that they had forgotten their responsibility and instead turned it into a market and a den of thieves. The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were responsible to teach the people of Israel the grace of God in accordance with His holy word. Jesus told the disciples, *“The scribes and Pharisees sit on the seat of Moses, so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice.”* He said they tied heavy burdens on peoples backs and made them twice as fit for hell, by teaching them salvation by their works, rather than faith in God's grace. In the verses prior to our text, He said all God wanted was faith, but they didn't want to believe.

We are not the Sadducees, scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the law, yet this parable speaks to us. It speaks to us, because we are part of God's kingdom the church of the New Testament; even as they were part of the church of the Old Testament. God found fault with many in the Old Testament church, because they pursued His righteousness as if it was something they could earn by their works and deserved because of their obedience. As a result, their hearts were proud towards God and hard towards others, whom they considered lesser than themselves. That's a danger we all must be careful to avoid. This parable like the preceding ones about grace and forgiveness, remind us that the kingdom of God is God's righteous reign in the human heart, which we experience as forgiveness when we believe in Jesus. The fruit of the kingdom is the expression of forgiveness in our lives with others, but God's reign in our lives begins with forgiveness we receive through faith in Jesus.

To make His point, Jesus tells a parable using the imagery of a vineyard, which a man built and let out to tenants. The tenants were given the responsibility of managing the vineyard and the obligation of returning some of the fruits to the owner. Jesus' parables used an earthly example to make a heavenly point. No human owner would tolerate the kind of insubordination and violence exhibited by the tenants in this parable. The bailiffs would have been there after the first payment was missing. The tenants would have been out on their ears before the first servant was beaten. No human owner would have let things go on so long. Certainly no human owner would have risked the lives of his servants or sacrificed the life of his son. But this is not parable about an earthly vineyard. It is a parable about God and His ways in the world and His desire to work peace and reconciliation in the human heart.

God is the owner of the vineyard and like the man in the parable, He was more than patient with Israel and its leaders in the Old Testament. More than patient He was long suffering! He suffered for centuries as Israel worshiped false gods. He sent prophets to call Israel to repentance, all of whom met resistance, some of whom suffered death. Yet He persisted! God is incomprehensible in His love. In Psalm 103 the psalmist sang, *“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.”* God showed the depth of His patience, the extent of His kindness and the magnitude of His love, by sending Jesus to Israel and to the world through His conception by the Holy Spirit and His birth by the Virgin Mary. Jesus called out to the leaders of Jerusalem and the last generation of ancient Israel, to turn to Him in faith and receive forgiveness and healing. Looking over the city, Jesus said, *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you would not.”*

See your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'” God, persistently and patiently, calls all of us to Himself in Christ that He might gather us under His wings and bless us with forgiveness, mercy and peace.

Our lesson from Isaiah is called the “Song of the Vineyard.” It tells how the Lord created Israel as His vineyard. He did this by bringing them out of slavery in Egypt, planting and establishing them in the land of Canaan. God loved Israel. He chose Israel out of all the nations of the world, simply because He loved them. God chooses out of love. God chose to set His love on us, also because He loves us. It’s kind of a circular argument, but God’s love is a circle of kindness that begins with Him, continues through Jesus and never ends, just like a circle. In fact, it’s a perfect circle! God wanted the world to know Him as love. Since sin entered the world and separated human beings from Him. As time passed, people knew less and less of His love. In fact, some of the ways people imagined and worshiped God, were horrible and violent, because that’s how they imagined Him to be and what they thought He wanted. He set His love on Israel and created them as His people, so they would know His love and let everyone else know His love. This was the good fruit the Lord desired Israel to produce!

Isaiah expresses the sadness and disappointment of the Lord in his song, singing, *“For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the men of Judah are His pleasant planting; and He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!”* The Lord disciplined Israel twice, by allowing it to be subdued by their enemies. He would let it happen again if they did not repent! Now it seemed unlikely! By the sound of Jesus in our gospel, it seems that God had finally given up on Israel, Jesus said, *“The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.”* Jesus’ words were fulfilled just forty years later when the Roman legions broke through the walls, destroyed the city and razed the temple. The Lord had given up on the religious leaders, but His steadfast love continued to be expressed to Israel, in and through the lives of many faithful Jewish people; the apostles and believers in Jerusalem and throughout Galilee and Judea. In removing something old, God made something new! In Jesus and through the blood of His cross, God made a new covenant between Himself and all people. It is a covenant of grace and forgiveness offered for all to receive. God now extends grace to the world through the gospel. He gives forgiveness to all who receive Jesus as Saviour and have faith in His holy name.

What God wants first and foremost is faith: that we would believe in His kindness and receive His love in Jesus. Jesus is the Son in the parable who died at the hands of the tenants. But He died at the hands of the religious leaders, in real life! They wanted to seize Him as He spoke, but were prevented by their fear of the crowd. But when they got Him alone in the dark, they seized their opportunity, arrested and condemned Him to death. This had happened to many prophets and righteous men, whom God had sent in the past. Now it was happening to His Son! But God would bring blessing, because through His cross, Jesus became the source of eternal salvation to all who believe! The author Hebrews sings, *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things.”* Jesus is the fullest expression of the Father’s love. He speaks to us words of forgiveness and love, as the very radiance and image of God.

From the cross He prayed His Father to forgive the people who condemned and crucified Him; the Roman authorities and the religious leaders of Israel and Jerusalem. Think about it! He spoke from the cross, not words of condemnation, but words of forgiveness. From the cross He offers all people forgiveness, peace with God and a place in His kingdom. The kingdom of God is His righteous reign in the world, beginning in the human heart, experienced by us as the forgiveness of sin. The good fruit God desires is faith produced by the Holy Spirit! When we receive Jesus through faith and believe His Holy name, the Holy Spirit produces the good fruit of forgiveness mercy and peace within us and through us; to His glory in time and for eternity. May the Lord who has begun this good work in us, bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ. In His Name. Amen