

October 4, 2020
Maricopa Lutheran Church
The 18th Sunday of Pentecost

This morning, let's do a little decoding with the Gospel lesson. That's what those who first heard this story did. Let's do that ourselves and try to see how the point of the parable applies to us.

First, the basic plot. The owner of a vineyard made a deal with tenants in which both would get a fair share of the harvest. Rather than pay their rent, the tenants beat up the bill collectors and killed the owner's son. After the son was killed, there were no more messengers. Now the owner was expected to bring justice on these murderers and bring in new tenants.

We already know the basics. We know it's good business for both the owner and the tenants to keep their agreement. We know it's wrong to steal and kill. We also know that a time comes when there are no more second chances and that people who do wrong may be punished severely.

Now let's do some decoding. Clearly, the owner in this story represents God. The vineyard can be the people of God, the whole creation, or both. God made us to be his tenants in his world. God wants us to enjoy the blessings he has given us. Still, everything has been entrusted to us, to take care of on God's behalf.

Some people say "it's my life. I'll do what I please with it." The Bible says that God is the real owner of my life. My job is to live my life in a way that honors God. That's the rent that I owe to my creator.

Here's where the great commandment comes in, that we love God with all we are and love our neighbors as ourselves. This means that the giver is more important than

the gift. God himself is more important than the people, possessions, or any other blessing that we receive. This also means that these blessings are to be channels of our Lord's grace to people whose lives we touch.

How different would it be if we humans really did make loving God and loving others our top priorities? For one extreme example, imagine that all the personal courage, scientific genius, wealth, and skill that go into the things of war were to go into healthcare and food? Because the evil in our world makes national defense necessary, that's not likely to happen before Jesus comes again. But it gives us an idea of how all humanity pays an extremely high price for our often violent addiction to our own desires.

Now let's decode how the tenants treated those who came for the rent. If the owner represents God, then the bill collectors represent the prophets, and the son represents Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate messenger.

From time to time, God sends people who tell us we're wrong, warn us of the consequences, and challenge us to change. Sometimes, God uses the people who anger us the most to save us from ourselves.

Now for the climax of the parable. By their behavior, the tenants brought the deadly wrath of the owner onto themselves.

Who likes to hear about the wrath of God? Not I. Like the chief priests and pharisees, we like to think that we're mostly good people. We like to hear about our merciful, forgiving, gracious God, who loves us so very much just the way we are. That's all true, as far as it goes. It's also true that our failing to repent can lead to horrible consequences.

God's wrath is what happens when he lets us choose what we desire so much but that damage us and other people so very badly. The wrong-doing of one generation can store up wrath for many generations yet to come. Like addicts in denial, we can blind ourselves to our own sin, even while we focus on the sins of others.

The promise and warning of this parable are that the owner shall return. Jesus tells us that God will use rejects like him to bring a whole new creation and to make everything right, no matter how bad things may be for now. Although God's war against evil has a long way to go before final victory, that day shall come when Jesus returns, raises the dead, and finishes the job.

Now, here's a question for you. How can we relate to a God who does both grace and wrath? Do we have two very different Gods or one that's pretty complicated?

Here's the answer that makes the most sense to me. Because he loves us, our one God shall continue to use his power to defeat evil and to establish his justice on earth as it already is in heaven. He shall keep doing this with you and me individually, with nations, and with the whole world. He shall keep doing this in his own time, often in ways that we don't understand, until his final victory that's clear for all to see.

When God acts, he's often like a surgeon, who brings us both pain and new life. Because of our sins, we may suffer under God's wrath. Through our faith, we receive the blessings of God's grace. Both are true, both the warning of wrath and the promise of grace.

Beneath a simple story, today's Gospel is about many deep things. First, it's about God's promises to defeat the forces of evil and death, and to establish a new creation. This shall happen, sooner or later, whether through us or over our resistance. It's a lot

better for us if God's will is done through us, for the other side of promise is threat. Jesus was clear that those who refuse to give God his due will be replaced by those who will.

So our hope in God's promise involves us actually doing what God commands, however imperfectly. We can pray that God inspire us to love him with all we are. We can study our Bibles to learn more of God's ways. We can receive the sacrament for our spiritual renewal. We can keep evaluating our calendars and checkbooks in terms of how we've been paying our rent to God. Then we can keep making some changes.

We also can work at loving others as we love ourselves. Different believers have different ideas about what really helps others and what doesn't. Regardless, we can act in the specific ways that we believe are most effective to be channels of divine grace to other people. When we do these things, the power of God's kingdom flows through us, however incompletely, even with all of our flaws and failings.

This simple story is not just about sparing ourselves and others the wrath of God, though it is that. Even more, it's about God using us to sow the seeds of his new creation.

Amen

Pastor Carl A. Jensen, livingsystemsconsult@gmail.com