**Sermon Text – Sunday, October 4, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus**

**1st Reading: Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-20; 2nd Reading: Philippians 3:4-14**
**Scripture for Message: Matthew 21:33-46 "A Parable"**

Jesus' parables confuse and challenge, inspire and enrage his listeners. This parable has so much in it and like all of the parables Jesus tells – it can be difficult to understand. It's possible to twist this into many different scenarios to make it about someone other than us, because surely Jesus isn't talking about us. I wonder though if this is a parable about the church and the people in it. Jesus does not begin this parable with the usual "The Kingdom is like . . ." which leads me to believe that Jesus isn't talking about the kingdom of heaven, but what is here on this earth.

A portion of our call to worship this morning is drawn from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, the words speak of a landowner lovingly creating a vineyard on a very fertile hill. The "owner" tended it, gave it protection, and expected good things from it – that did not happen the vineyard yielded wild grapes. Therefore, the owner tore it down, they removed the hedges that were protecting it and thus allowed its destruction. Isaiah gives the explanation that the "vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah the pleasant planting; he expected justice but saw bloodshed; righteousness but heard a cry!" (Isa.5:7). Remembering the struggles of the people of Judah and the house of Israel during the time of Isaiah and the prophets we can grasp the meaning of that analogy.

Moving forward into Jesus' time – and knowing about how Matthew dealt with the relationship of his "church" to the Jewish leaders in his Gospel, we might bring that same analogy to our understanding of the parable for that time period. Matthew did have a rather edgy relationship with Judaism, which is understandable because he wrote his gospel sometime after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD. Consequently, Matthew wrote to a community in formation, identifying an enemy that his "church" could unite around. Matthew lends his interpretation to Jesus' parable that the "murderous tenants" were the Pharisees and religious leaders of the time. For Matthew, and his Jewish audience, the violent rejection of the son leads to punishment by God in the form of the political disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem. That is

how they, in that age, believed God dealt with sin and the rejection of Jesus – "This is the Lord's doing."

When we get to the end of this section of scripture, Matthew tells us that the chief priests and the Pharisees heard the parable and understood that Jesus was talking about them – they recognized that they were the ones entrusted to tend the vineyard – or the house of Israel as Isaiah explains it. They wanted to arrest Jesus because he, in the telling of this and other parables, challenged their authority and their perceived "right" to make and change God's rules. The Pharisees knew the people regarded Jesus as a prophet; a messenger from God but they rejected what he had to teach them – just like the tenants in Jesus' parable.

The enemies Matthew identified in his gospel do not exist for us today, our culture is different – we must look at this parable in light of our current circumstances and not bring Matthew's partialities to bear. We are more enlightened and because of Jesus, we are free from believing that our struggles are God's punishment. We know that the heirs of the Pharisees and rabbis and the Christian church – in all its forms – can live in respectful relationship and work together to fulfill God's purposes on earth. That might be the purpose for our hearing this parable today.

Like I said earlier, there are many ways to look at this parable. Some will choose to see the vineyard as the church that Jesus established and then entrusted to his disciples. I recently recorded Hope Words for Facebook, and the words remind me of this parable. The fictional story goes like this: Jesus is in heaven after his resurrection, Moses asks him – "Did you leave things in capable hands?" To which Jesus responds, "I did, I have left behind Mary and Martha and Peter with the other disciples." Moses asks, "What if they fail?" Jesus again responds, "I have established the Church and filled it with the Holy Spirit and they will carry on." Moses asks, "What if they fail?" Jesus finally responds – "I have no other plan."

The church carries the legacy of Jesus' teachings, passed down through generations for the people to tend and nurture. We are, the church is, Jesus' plan for the salvation of the world. If the church produces only "wild grapes" then its current structure will fail and be replaced with something different – but there will always be a church. God's will is that the church succeeds, Jesus has proclaimed that even the gates of Hades will not overcome the rock on which the church is built. That does not

however mean that the church will remain stagnate – the church has been evolving / changing for the past two-thousand years.

Sometimes I wonder if the religious leaders of our time have so complicated the structure of the "church" that Jesus would hardly recognize it. People will sometimes be heard saying that if Jesus were to come back, or one of Jesus' messengers, our culture would certainly treat him as harshly as in the first century and his message rejected. Don't we also reject, or "kill" the holy spirit when we choose our own way rather than allow the spirit's guidance. Jesus would experience the same rejection because he most certainly would challenge what we have done in the "vineyard."

In Jesus parable, the vineyard was taken away from the "murderous tenants" and given to other tenants who would produce fruits at harvest time. In our time, religious leaders who serve only self and want to make everything about themselves will find themselves replaced by ones who serve God and produce the fruits of the kingdom. It can be said that in our current culture, religion inevitably becomes what people are led to put their faith in instead of God – do we follow Jesus or do we follow "religion?" Maybe for some of us it's a combination of both.

At the time Matthew writes his gospel, the Pharisees were losing their power because the temple of Jerusalem had been destroyed. The religious leaders in the synagogues however were so firmly rooted in their beliefs that they rejected those who followed Jesus. They were unwilling to accept that there could be a divine voice other than the Torah. They rejected the living word of God – a word that was more about mercy, grace, and forgiveness. I wonder if some of today's religious leaders and followers feel the same way – believing that God is done speaking and that scripture has nothing new to teach. These leaders are putting doctrine ahead of the living word of God.

I can't say for certain what I believe about the "meaning" of this parable. I question the motives of the landowner who continually sends his messengers to be beaten and abused, even murdered by the tenants. I want to agree with the reply the Pharisees give Jesus when he asked "What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he returns." They responded, "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." But now, I think about God's mercy and compassion toward humanity, and about Jesus' concern for his bride the church – surely out of compassion and a desire for mercy there would be second chances even third chances for the tenants to get the care of the vineyard right.

Furthermore, it is not the vineyard that experiences destruction in Jesus' parable, in fact he does not even say that the tenants were sent to their death, only that the landowner replaced them. The lesson for us – worshipers of Christ in Christ's church – is that the time will come for us to account for our care of the vineyard. If we, as tenants and caretakers of the church, think we can reject the messengers that God sends and seek eternity through our own devices we are wrong and we will be crushed and broken on the "cornerstone." We know because Jesus has told us that the church will prevail, humanity however will not and is given the task of preserving the church and Jesus' teachings for the generations that come after.

For the ones who make the church all about themselves and choose to "believe" in their concept of religion rather than what Jesus teaches – the time of judgment will be severe. For the ones who reject the "new thing" God is doing in our world today – judgment might also be severe. The parable that Jesus tells here is, in my mind, a parable about our world today. A parable about the rejection of God's messengers and a culture that tries to create its own rules. Even when you don't like the message – listen to the messenger because God might just be doing something new.

Bottom line is that this parable is about Hope and mercy – God will keep trying to send the message so that the people of God's church will get things right. God will remain with us, always beside us, always speaking to those who will listen. "Surely judgment will come one day; but mercy hopes beyond hope for change."