

Inheritance - Matthew 21:33-46

Pentecost 20 A

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The Holy Gospel according to St
Matthew, the 21st chapter

Glory to you, O Lord

Jesus said, “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went away. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them in the same way. Then he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those

tenants?” The Pharisees said to Jesus, “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.”

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’?

Jesus continued, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and **given to a people that produces its fruits**. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because the people regarded Jesus as a prophet.

This is the Good News, the Gospel of our Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Here in Tennessee we awoke Thursday morning to headlines of a botched execution at Riverbend state penitentiary in Nashville. Christa Pike, as a Knoxville teenager in 1995, schemed to punish Colleen Slemmer for trying to win over Christa's boyfriend. Christa confessed that she made Colleen suffer a gruesome, violent murder. And as of this week, 50 year old Christa Pike on death row now suffers likely brain damage on life support as the result of Wednesday night's painful injections that did not accomplish the goal to enact the death penalty. Our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America acknowledges that our Death Penalty intends to deter additional crime and keep society safe, but the ELCA opposes the death penalty for 3 reasons:

- 1) Executions represent an unacceptable, non-

restorative approach to violent crime (they are revenge based and leave no chance for God's restorative redemption)

- 2) Executions can reinforce social injustice, (just look at the disproportionate numbers of people of color on death row) and
- 3) The death penalty can not possibly be administered justly (it far too easily veers into cruel and unusual punishment).

I encourage you to google the words [ELCA Death Penalty](#) to find our ELCA Death Penalty statement and wrestle with our church's teaching.

Christa Pike's execution is a reminder that we **struggle** to make things right in the face of wrongdoing. We're now learning that not only did Christa fail Colleen by brutally taking her life, but we failed Christa who as early as age 4 endured multiple rapes and sexual assaults with no one to protect her.

Christa's suffering led her to attempt suicide in 3rd grade and again in 6th grade. Just as we must denounce the violence of Christa's murder of Colleen, we are called to see the Christ in Christa. O, Lord, have mercy on us.

Today's Gospel reading teaches about God's mercy in the face of murder -- the rebellious tenants working the vineyard kept what wasn't theirs through violence and murder, even killing the land owner's son. And Jesus asks, how should the land owner respond? The Pharisees suggest the death penalty. Jesus chooses mercy.

Some context: when Jesus tells this parable the Gospel of Matthew places him early in Holy Week. Jesus arrived in a festive parade, but Jesus knows how the crowd's shouting will shift from happy HOSANNAS to angry clenched demands for justice: CRUCIFY HIM!

The Pharisees were scheming to get even and eliminate the threat *Jesus* posed to their safety & peace. By Holy Week's end, the Pharisees' scheme seems to succeed.

So that's where Jesus teaches us about God's mercy with this parable of a vineyard. Building a vineyard was a long term hope-filled project. After the initial construction would be many harvests of unusable sour grapes. *Good* fruit harvests wouldn't come for years. Imagine the courageous long-term act of trusting others for years for your most hoped-for outcome, only to be met with murderous violence & devastating loss of life. The evil tenants in the parable were scheming to earn the landowner's *inheritance*. How crazy is that? If we kill his son, we'll get the son's inheritance?!? *When have our botched human schemes ever led to the richness of God's inheritance?*

So why didn't the landowner just deal with this in court – why send so many representatives, including his own son? This parable emphasizes God's merciful reconciliation: that God keeps pursuing us, not sentencing us to the justice we deserve but chasing us with God's love. And God doesn't want the sour grapes of our attempts to get even at each other — God wants our **fruit of reconciliation**: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. That's the inheritance we long for! I like in this video how comedian Mark Lowery describes human judgment ([video](#)): “I was never good at loving the sinner but hating the sin. There's too many of you. Hating my sin is a full time job. How 'bout you hate your sin, I'll hate my sin, and let's love each other.”

God pursues relationship... with all of us.

God knows that relationships... are costly and messy.

God pays the cost with the life of his son, and proclaims... you're worth it.

God... has big plans for your fruit in service to God's kingdom.

We must bear fruit by living God's reconciliation.

In World War II, upon finding his precious church destroyed by enemy bombs, the next morning the priest of Coventry Cathedral found large spike nails in the debris which he fashioned into a cross and underneath wrote the words of Jesus on the cross, "Father Forgive," and posted it for all to see in the rubble. Now Coventry Cathedral leads an international community of intentional reconciliation. That's kingdom work – that's fruit of God's vineyard! Coventry's reconciliation ministry uses this prayer as its central guide. We pray together:

L All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The hatred that divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,

C Father, forgive.

L The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own.

C Father, forgive.

L The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth.

C Father, forgive.

L Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,

C Father, forgive.

L Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee,

C Father, forgive.

L The lust which dishonors the bodies of men, women and children,

C Father, forgive.

L The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves, and not in God,

C Father, forgive.

L Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you.

Amen.