NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*What Shall We Learn?* Matthew 21:33-46

As good and faithful people, you and I are here together almost every Sunday morning of our lives. Whether it has been with this congregation or another one somewhere else, some of us have been doing this since we were children. We come to hear the words of Christ publicly proclaimed, and the stories that have been preserved for us about him. We listen and/or follow along with the copies of the sermon manuscript so that we may learn and understand.

Learning—that is our goal—yours and mine. We listen and study and we learn. We learn about what God is like, what is important to God—what should be important to us. In short, we learn how to live.

Having said that I would like to tell you that the passage we just heard is one of the more difficult stories from the Bible that we have when it comes to finding out how what God expects us to learn, and how God wants us to live. Part of the difficulty comes from how deceptively straight forward the parable appears to be.

We listen to the words of Jesus as he shares this parable and we think to ourselves: “OK, I see what he is doing here.” And we go on to assign various people to the characters in Jesus’ story.

In fact, for many of the last two thousand years, as Christians have listened or read and studied this parable, we have assigned the characters in the following way:

*The landowner = God*. God made everything—like the landowner in the parable. So, everything belongs to God who deserves a portion of everything that the tenants make.

*The slaves who are sent to collect the landowners produce (both times)* = the prophets who came to lead the people back to God when they had gone astray. As we read through the Bible we see that the many times God sent someone to scold humans for their wayward ways. We also see how the prophets were treated. It was distain at the very least, and death at the very worst.

*The bad tenants* = the Jews—if the slaves were the prophets then the tenants must be the ones who had rejected the prophets and who treated God disrespectfully.

The landowner’s son, the heir = Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior.

In making our assignments in this way, the Jews—the whole nation—become the villains, the sinners, the evil ones because they are the ones (in the parable) who kill the servants *and* the son.

And if this reading is right, if we have correctly assigned the characters, then the bad tenants—the Jews—as a whole nation, *and* throughout all of history—are people who *deserve* discrimination and persecution. Indeed, they are the Christ-killers who deserve oppression, suffering, and maltreatment.

As we all know, this has been their fate throughout the many centuries since Christ’s death, and the Christian church’s ascendancy throughout that time. The Jews have been pursued and bullied in many countries and for many hundreds of years.

As a people and individually, they have been hounded out of many countries. In the last couple of hundred years, the word *“progrom,”* despite being a Russian word, has entered the lexicon of many people around the world because it so exactly describes the organized massacre of a specific ethnic group, in particular that of Jewish people in Russia and/or eastern Europe.

At this point, it is appropriate for us to ask: What shall we learn? If this is the way we have assigned the roles of each of the characters in Jesus’ story, the most basic question we should be asking ourselves is: what does Jesus want us to learn from this parable? Shall we learn how to hate and to persecute? This is what naturally comes from such a reading. This is what has happened, and what continues to happen throughout the world.

The problem most of us can see right away is that “learning to hate, to persecute, and to kill”—this does not make sense when it comes to following a God who is so loving that God sent God’s only son to show us what love is.

Jesus is the child who was sent. Jesus is the heir who laid down his own life so that human beings may once again have life abundant and eternal life. It does *not* make sense that such a God would want us to learn about persecution and death.

This is borne out when we look back again at the parable. When we do, what we see is that the landowner is the one who is amazingly generous. He is the one who responds with hope and ever greater compassion, each time, to the sad fate of the slaves that he sends. The hope the landowner has in the tenants does not dry up. Instead, he even sends his son who is also thrown out of the vineyard and killed.

If the tenants are not the Jews, then who are they?

When we look back at the parable, there are two things we should see. The first is that Jesus, as he told this story, was speaking to the Pharisees and priests. These are the people who had been closely questioning him and trying to catch him saying something they could hold against him. They were the ones who were afraid of the growing trust and influence Jesus was having with the people. He was changing their lives for good. He was teaching them to look for compassion and justice in God’s ways—not the human fault and weakness for power and wealth that often comes with power over others. This is what the Pharisees had been doing.

The second thing to notice is that when we assigned identities to characters, we missed one. We missed assigning the vineyard an identity. The vineyard was the people, the Jewish people and also the many people who live and work under worldly powers. They are the ones who are most affected by good or bad leadership. They are the ones who God made and cultivated for thriving.

When it comes to learning, rather than learning persecution and hatred, it seems to me that God wants us to learn of how deeply patient and loving God is. Instead of demanding—even of faithless leaders—what is God’s due, God models patience and faithfulness. Instead of sending death and destruction at the first hint of disobedience, God sends even greater signs of compassion and love.

What shall we learn and give to God in return?

From the parable, what I hope we will learn is that God made us and the world around us. We are God’s people who are being given what we need to live and to thrive.

Another thing I hope we will learn from this parable is also very much a part of what we have accomplished together, and which we celebrated just a couple of weeks ago: which is that as much as we love our church home, as much as we take pride and look forward to being here together, we also recognize that this is *God’s* house, and we are still workers in God’s vineyard—on God’s mission.

This means we give all we can to continue the mission. This is what and who God means us to be—this is how God has assigned us our place in the parable.

We are not to be like the tenants in the parable. The tenants felt a degree of ownership of and entitlement to the vineyard and its produce that was not true to their lease agreement. You do not own this, Jesus was telling the audience then *and* now, especially the chief priests and Pharisees. Everything you have, everything you are, is a gift from God for you to tend accordingly.

As one person has written:

*This parable challenges us to consider how we manage the harvest we have been given. A concrete example of this is our buildings. Are our buildings walled off fortresses like the vineyard in this parable, serving only those of us inside? Or are they tools to build our mission of sharing God’s love with the whole world?*

*In a presentation on church mission, a church consultant remarked, “When the founding fathers and mothers of our country set up the way local governments would be, they granted permission that churches would be exempt from property taxes, because of the way churches would contribute to the support of the community.” Then he added, “Think about what the property tax would be on your building and property, and ask the question, ‘Do we give back to the community at least what they give us in not having to pay property taxes?’”*

A first read of this parable is a challenging one, with the tenants’ violence and the landowner’s, certainly entitled, decision to take back the land and give it to those more deserving. However, read in context of the rest of Jesus’ teachings, this parable becomes an opportunity for us to learn and to reframe our sense of entitlement and remember God’s intentions for all that we have.

And that is the most important thing for us to learn about God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit: that while they are unchanging—the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow—*we* can and *we* *must* change. We must enlarge our understanding of who God is, of the expansiveness of God heart.

And while we will never encompass all of who God is; while there is still be so much more to learn about God and God’s world, we can and must be changed by the love we are shown all of the time.

As we continue our life together on this beautiful campus in this beautiful world; as we work toward the goal of making this a place where the whole community may know the love of God, let us rejoice in what we have been given to share. Let us give thanks for the many ways we have been blessed. Let us learn an on-going lesson of humility, generosity, and love. May this be so. Amen.