

He went on to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time.¹⁰ At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed.¹¹ He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed.¹² He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.

¹³ “Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.’

¹⁴ “But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. ‘This is the heir,’ they said. ‘Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’¹⁵ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

“What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?¹⁶ He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”

When the people heard this, they said, “May this never be!”

¹⁷ Jesus looked directly at them and asked, “Then what is the meaning of that which is written:

“ ‘The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone’?”

¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

¹⁹ The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people. (Luke 20:9-19)

Does This Make Sense?

This morning, we have before us a section of the Scripture that I’ve always found difficult to preach about. It’s one of the last parables Jesus told. He was issuing a final warning to people who didn’t want to listen to him, to people who, in fact, were planning to kill him. But that desire on the part of Jesus’ enemies is not what makes this story hard for me to apply. Rather, what I’ve always struggled with in this parable is how illogical the actions of every character are. Not one thing that anybody does in this parable, at least after it gets set up, makes any sense at all. Of course, a parable is not a true story in the sense that there really was a vineyard someplace where these things happened. Rather, as we learned in Sunday school, a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. The words and actions of the characters are designed to teach us deep truths about God and about ourselves. This morning, as we consider this parable, we want to look for those truths. We’re going to have to ask ourselves: **does this make sense?**

I.

Jesus told this parable on the Tuesday before he died. He was teaching in the temple and one after another, his enemies challenged him and debated with him. Jesus won every debate. This parable was a part of that day of confrontation. When we hear his earthly story, we have ask: **does it make sense to send your own Son into danger?**

In the story a landowner plants a vineyard. He was about to go on a long trip, so he rented the vineyard out to some tenant farmers. They would work the land and at harvest time, they would divide the crop with him. Well, when the harvest came, the landowner sent a servant to collect his share. But the tenants refused to give it. In fact, they beat the servant and sent him away. The landowner tried a second and a third time, but the violence only escalated. Each time the servant came away empty. Finally, the landowner reasoned that the tenants would respect his son. So he sent him to collect what was owed. But the tenants figured, “**This is the heir. Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.**” That’s what they did. The parable ends with Jesus pointing out that the landowner himself would come and kill these men and then rent his vineyard to others who would live up to the agreement.

Did you catch all the different things that just don’t seem to track? Let’s start with the tenants. I can understand them breaking a business deal. It shouldn’t happen, but it does. And if the issue would’ve been that they had a bad year or a poor crop and they just couldn’t afford to give the landowner his share without being

wiped out themselves, we might have had some sympathy for them. But that's not the story Jesus told. They just refused to give the fruits the landowner had coming. Rather than taking the landowner to court to try to change the agreement, rather than trying to renegotiate and get a better deal, they slapped around the servants he sent and threw them out. Each time the violence got worse. When the son came, they figured that if they killed the heir, somehow they were going to get to keep the vineyard. Does that make sense? Would they really think they could get away with that?

But as ridiculous as all that is, for me, at least, the landowner is even harder to understand. First of all, why keep sending faithful servants to these guys? You'd think that once the violence began, the landowner would think twice about sending anybody else. But he keeps going until he doesn't have anybody left to send. Then comes the strangest thing of all: he sends his own son to confront men who've already proven how they are to hurt people. Why did he do that? It's not like he had a problem with his son – he loves him. Rather, Jesus said that he thought, **“Perhaps they will respect him.”** Now, had these guys ever done anything to indicate they might do that? If it were you or me, wouldn't we reason, “These guys are thugs. I'll send the cops over there, but I'm not letting my son go anywhere near them”? Even if he wanted to, wouldn't we stop him?

Of course we would! That's the whole point. Because, my friends, this is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning and I suspect you already know what the meaning is. The son is Jesus, the Son of God. The landowner is our Father in heaven. The vineyard is the Church – in this case the Church of the Old Testament. It's Israel. And who are the tenants? They are the religious leaders of the Jewish people. They are the people God had entrusted his Church to. What were they supposed to do? Cultivate the spiritual lives of God's people so that they would bring forth fruits of faith. That is, so that they would live Christian and holy lives. And yes, the tenants themselves would get a share of those lives when God's people loved them and supported their ministry. But God himself would have what he wants most from his children: lives of faith.

But the history of Israel is tragic. It's a history of unfaithful religious leaders leading an unfaithful people ever deeper into sin. So over and over again, God sent prophets to his people – the servants in the parable – to call them and their leaders to repent. But again and again the religious leaders, which in Israel did include the king, persecuted those prophets and led the people away from God. Finally, in the fullness of time, God sent his Son to Israel to call them back to the Lord and to fulfill 1500 years of promises made to them. God sent Jesus to them so that they would be his people and bring forth fruits of faith.

What did the religious leaders of God's people do? They killed him. They orchestrated protests by a mob, they pressured the Roman governor, they held an illegal trial at night and brought in false witnesses and they killed him. And when he rose, they even paid the guards to lie and say that his disciples stole the body. Somehow, they thought that all that would enable them to keep their privileged position as leaders of God's people! It makes no sense. And the thing that makes it all even more incredible is that God knew all this was going to happen. He prophesied about it in the Old Testament. Jesus himself told his disciples over and over again that the Jewish leaders would betray him and hand him over to the gentiles who would crucify him. None of this was a surprise. And yet, he still sent his one and only Son to them.

Why? Is it possible that God didn't like his Son or was trying to teach him a lesson? Of course not! At least twice, God called Jesus his beloved Son. Still he sent him to suffer death and hell on a cross. Why did he do that? It just doesn't make any sense! But that's the beauty of it. God did something that we would never do. God loved us so much that he sacrificed the Son that he loves more than all other things for us. Jesus came to pay for all the sins of all the world. Jesus died for Israel and all its tragic history. He died for those religious leaders who worked day and night to kill him. He died for Pontius Pilate and the mob and the men who drove the nails through his hands and feet. He died for the whole nation that followed these leaders like sheep.

And he died for you and for me. Now, maybe we don't feel like we're the kind of men that these Jewish leaders were. We do trust in Jesus. And we hope and pray that fruits of faith are coming from us. But, my friends, we cannot take credit for being here today. Jesus made the sin of his enemies look ridiculous because every time we disobey the God who loves and did everything for us, it is absolutely senseless. What can we possibly gain from loving ourselves more than God? Yet, we do. That's how we were born and even we Christians still struggle with pride, with grudges, with putting what we want ahead of what God says. We cannot claim that we're better because we're here in the vineyard. It's only by the grace of God that we're here. What puts us here is that death of Christ.

God did something that just doesn't make sense to us selfish sinners: he sent his Son into violence and death so that we will live. Just like in the parable, when all was said and done, he gave us new tenants. Wouldn't you think that after the old tenants killed his son, the landowner wouldn't care about the vineyard any more? But he does. He rents it out again. When Jesus told that part of the parable, he was talking about us. The vineyard is the Church.

Today, we don't live under the Old Testament priesthood. So even though those old tenants killed Jesus and will pay for it, Jesus died for us. And God made sure that we had the benefit of that love. He sent his word to us in a ministry that has continued since the time of the apostles: the ministry of the gospel. Sure, some individuals have not been faithful workers. Whole church bodies have turned away from the word of God and all too often, the pastors and teachers of those church bodies led the way, and their people didn't protest. But you and I have the word. And God promises that even if Peace loses it, even if the WELS loses it, he will provide faithful workers until the Lord returns.

II.

God's love defies all explanation. The very last verse of our text this morning says that the teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest Jesus because they knew that he had spoken this parable against them. They understood because Jesus made his meaning clear. Why? Because he loved them and he was warning them about the consequences of their sin one last time before they moved against him. My friends, **does it make sense to warn your enemies about their danger?**

If someone were trying to get us arrested on false charges so that we would go to prison or worse be executed, I think most of us would be glad to know that they were going to get caught and punished themselves. But even though Jesus came here to die, he wanted his enemies to escape punishment. He wanted them to repent. That's why he quoted from Psalm 118: **"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone."** The Jews knew that Psalm 118 is about the Messiah, the promised Savior. Jesus pointed out that the Savior would be rejected by the people who were supposed to be building God's Church – by them, the leaders. But that stone still would become the capstone. In a Roman arch, the capstone is the stone that sits at the top of the arch and holds the arch together. After he was rejected, God made Jesus the capstone, the one who holds his whole church together.

That was going to happen no matter what these men did to stop it. Jesus was letting them know that their efforts would fail and that fighting against him would have consequences. He warned them that when the stone fell on them they would be crushed. If they faced him as unbelievers on Judgment Day they would go to hell. When he warned them, he was reaching out his hand in love to them. And this wasn't the last time! Even at his trial, he told them who he was.

That love is the love that we have experienced. God does not owe us anything. But God has come to each of us and he's given us faith. God came to us in the waters of holy baptism and he worked through the word and Jesus' promise and he washed away our sins. God came to us in the gospel and he gave us faith. Today, he still works in that gospel to keep our faith alive. God comes to us in the Lord's Supper, God comes to us when we hear that our sins are forgiven, God comes to us and he builds our faith so that we will live with him forever.

Why on earth should God do that for us? We are sinners. God says that even our best works are filthy rags. We don't like to hear that, but God says it's true. If that is true, if there is nothing about me that deserves God's love, if I can't do anything to make God happy on my own, why would he want me? Because that is the nature of God's love. It's not like human love. It doesn't love only what's loveable. God's love defies all human understanding and loves the lowest and the worst. It loves God's enemies – it loves us who were born enemies of God and it made us his friends, his children, his people. God's love blows all human logic away and that is the genius of his love. It is a love that sent his own Son to die and save us. That love is yours, today. Amen.