

Sermon - 10-04-20
Ps 19:7-10; Ex 20:1-20; Phil 3:4b-14; Mt 21:33-46
Workers in the Vineyard

In times like these, we start to ask, “Lord, are we being tested?” Help us keep the faith without wavering! Our great God is always good, always loving, always just. Why, then, do we forget God’s character when evil and suffering multiply? We ask, “Why is this happening?” Or we cry out, “O Lord God, why have You let this happen?” Our example of patient endurance is the ancient patriarch Job. God permitted Satan to test Job’s faith with crushing loss and grief. Job cried out in agony. God’s only answer: I AM Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all things. He told his man Job to look at Behemoth, the great land monster – to look at Leviathan, the great sea monster – and to be amazed at the sheer power and wonder of what has been created. All by God.

In our readings in Matthew’s Gospel the past few weeks, Jesus tells one parable after another. He is telling stories about things people know from daily life – mostly work, especially working on the land. That was how most families made their living. Jesus told stories they could understand.

Today, Jesus tells about a landowner who decides to set up a vineyard. It would be common to see such a thing. The rich man sets it up and leases it to tenants. You and I are servants when it comes to working in God’s kingdom. God has provided the vines, the press, the wall and the tower. We are in this garden temporarily. We answer to the owner of the vineyard. We are here to increase the fruitfulness of His vines. But, the tenants in this parable are wicked. They have murdered all the messengers sent by the landowner! It’s as though (in our day) the landlord sends an agent to collect the rent. The occupant opens the door and beats and injures the agent, then slams the door shut. Shocking.

This parable appears in the context of a long conversation (disputation) between Jesus and the church leaders in the temple. It’s too easy for us to hold this bunch at arm’s length and say, “How awful. I would never behave that way!”

It is tempting to forget we are also sojourners – temporary helpers who have made a promise to bring in the harvest to be pressed and poured into jars and turned into wine for the owner – not for ourselves. You may say, “Wait a minute, preacher, I am the master of my fate. What I make belongs to me.”

The chief priests and elders also question Jesus’ authority. So, Jesus reminds them that over the generations those who work God’s vineyard have killed the prophets who brought God’s word – and Jesus predicts that they will also kill Him. Jesus sees their hearts and knows their plan.

I am not accusing you of anything so outrageous as murdering the rent collector. Jesus is speaking to the nation of Israel. God took a wandering Aramean and began to create a people for Himself. God delights in His people – He created us to abide with Him forever. Jacob, the wandering Aramean, became Israel and grew to be a nation. Now, Jesus Messiah speaks to the leaders of the nation. From the time of the Judges, through all the faithful prophets, including John Baptist, Israel has hated the Word of God that has been sent to them. They have killed the messengers. God has sent good news in many ways, by many faithful messengers. At last, God sent His only Son to lovingly persuade His wayward, strong-willed people. He says, “Come to me and I will give you rest—all of you who work so hard beneath a heavy yoke. Wear my yoke—for it fits perfectly—and let me teach you; for I am gentle and humble, and you shall find rest for your souls; for I give you only light burdens.” (Mt 11:28 TLB)

We may look into the character of our God. We may understand how He wishes to form us and shape our spirits to conform to His Holy Spirit. When we absorb Ex 20 or Dt 5 – we behold God’s gracious intentions for us.

The Law shows us God’s pure and righteous face. This Law is the covenant guide for God’s people entering the Promised Land. The ministry and sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus bring that rightness into our hearts by grace, through faith in Him. The Law is good news, but the coming of the Savior Jesus Christ is the best news. In Him we are also given resurrection from the dead – abundant life now in His presence– and eternal life when our sojourn is over.

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Just as God led His people out of slavery and forced labor in Egypt, giving them the Law, the manual of abundant life – so also, God in Christ woos and leads us out of the bondage of sin – the kingdom of darkness and despair, sending the Worthy Lamb, Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul makes his confession to the church at Philippi, that he used to consider himself blameless under the Law in his days as a church official. He believed he had escaped being a sinner. But, when he woke up to God's kingdom of light in the life and sacrifice of Jesus, he saw he had no righteousness of his own.

Such an awakening came also to John Wesley in 1737, as he was sailing back to England from Savannah, GA. He saw the Moravian missionaries remaining calm, singing hymns while the seas raged. He landed in December. John was depressed and defeated by the failure of his American ministry, the loss of his girlfriend, Sophie, and the feeling that he did not have the unshakeable faith of the Moravians. In May, friends invited him to attend the reading of Luther's preface to the Letter to the Romans. He declined and wanted to stay home. Everyone insisted, so he went to this meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. The Holy Spirit was present in a mighty way that evening, and John felt for the first time that the Lord Jesus was his own, personal Savior. His heart was "strangely warmed."

He repented of his cold, intellectual form of being a Jesus follower. The Great Awakening burst forth from his conversion.

Acts of piety don't save you. Neither do acts of mercy. These things are evidence, not proof. Paul says, "God's way of making us right with Himself depends on faith—counting on Christ alone." (Phil 2:9 TLB) Then we become faithful workers in the vineyard of the world.

Amen.