

+ 20th Sunday After Pentecost: October 18th, 2020 +
St Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin
Pastor Korey Van Kampen
“Listen to Jesus and Live”

It's the phone call that no one wants to get. You had a routine checkup at the doctor, and, as is normal, they drew blood to run some basic tests. Now, a week later, you get a phone call, "We'd like you to come in soon and talk about the results of your bloodwork." When you get that phone call, what do you know? You know that something isn't right. If your bloodwork was normal, you wouldn't get called to come in -- you'd get an email or a phone message saying so. So you schedule your appointment and get called back. Finally the doctor comes in and, with a voice filled with gentleness and compassion, says, "It's cancer." You get that kind of news and what do you do? To take the hard news to heart is the only option that gives you a chance to live -- while ignoring the hard news, or even getting angry at the one who shared it with you only ensures that it will kill you. So then, what do we do when God's Word tells us something that's hard? Whether it is a hard truth about ourselves, or a hard truth about God's will? What we'll hear Jesus calling us to do in this parable is to listen to him -- even if it's hard -- and live.

Matthew 21:33-43 "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. He leased it out to some tenant farmers and went away on a journey. ³⁴ When the time approached to harvest the fruit, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵ The tenant farmers seized his servants. They beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then the landowner sent even more servants than the first time. The tenant farmers treated them the same way. ³⁷ Finally, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. ³⁸ But when the tenant farmers saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance!' ³⁹ They took him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰ So when the landowner comes, what will he do to those tenant farmers?" ⁴¹ They told him, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end. Then he will lease out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him his fruit when it is due." ⁴² Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes? ⁴³ "That is why I tell you the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruit.

It is now just a matter of days before Jesus' death. He's ridden into Jerusalem to palm branches. He's cleared the money changers out of the temple, and he's continued to teach in Jerusalem. All the while the opposition to him among the Jewish leaders is growing. He knows how they feel about him and what they're hoping to do to him. So he tells them this parable. In that day, and especially in that part of the world, there were considerable chunks of land that were large estates owned by foreigners. Those foreigners didn't live in Judea or Galilee, but somewhere else. So they gave care of their farms and land and vineyards to local people who ran them -- they were called tenant farmers. Typically a tenant farmer would grow the crops and then return a portion of the harvest to the landowner as a payment for using the land. When done well, it was a win for all involved. Local people got jobs and the opportunity to make a good living, and the landowner received a return on their investment in the land.

But in Jesus' parable, it was not done well. The problem was with the tenants. When the landowner sent servants to claim his portion of the harvest, the tenants treated them terribly -- beating one, plain old killing another, and then killing a third by throwing stones at him. When the landowner sent more servants, the same thing happened again. Finally, the landowner, out of desperation to get them to listen, sends his Son and they throw him out and kill him too. But when they kill the son, we get a little glimpse of their motivation -- a little glimpse of why they did what they did. When the tenants see the son coming, they say to each other, "**This is the heir, come let's kill him and take his inheritance!**" These tenants didn't want to be tenants anymore. They wanted to be the owners. They wanted to own the fields. They wanted to keep the vineyard for themselves and not have to give a portion of the crop to someone else -- and they thought that if they got rid of the Son that now the vineyard would be theirs to do with as they pleased.

Jesus tells them this story to make a point. Just like the tenants in the parable, God had sent them his servants, the prophets, and how had they treated the prophets? The book of Hebrews summarizes how the prophets were treated: "*Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned, sawed in two, they were put to death by the sword,*" (Heb 11:36-37). And now, God has sent his Son to these same people who had rejected the prophets -- and what are they preparing to do to him? They're preparing to kill him too. And why are they doing all this? It's the same reason that the tenants want to get rid of the Son. They wanted to own the vineyard. They wanted to be in control -- to have their life to do with as they pleased for themselves. But what's really interesting is the two ways they went about it. In their history, why were the prophets rejected? It was because they called out sin. They called the people to repent for following other gods, for dishonest business practices, for engaging in temple prostitution, for failing to observe the things that God had directed them to do. The prophets warned that if they did not turn away from sin, that God would turn away from them. The people didn't want to hear that -- and that's why the prophets were mistreated.

But now in Jesus' time it's different. Now these religious leaders aren't necessarily engaging in blatant, wanton sinful actions. They weren't going to the temple prostitutes. They weren't bowing down to Baal. They were observing all the festivals and rituals that had been directed. They were rejecting Jesus, the Son, because they felt that with their religious devotion and their good lives, they had earned a good standing before God and his favor, so they didn't need a Savior from sin. Both wanted control. Their ancestors wanted to exercise control in their life by living however they wanted so they rejected the prophets. The religious leaders at Jesus' time wanted to exercise control in their lives through their outward religious dedication -- thinking that by it they could control God, that it would put God on their side and in their debt, so they rejected Jesus. They were acting like wicked tenants. And what happens to wicked tenants like these? The leaders themselves say, "**He will bring those wretches to a wretched end.**" God's kingdom would be taken away from them. Jesus sees what is going on in their hearts and he's warning them. It's like he sees them running toward a spiritual cliff that is going to kill them if they fall off it, and he's doing everything that he can possibly do to warn them and try to lead them to stop. If only they would listen to Jesus and live!

And if only we would do the same. It might seem strange at first that we take time to apply this parable that was directed at a pretty specific group of people almost 2000 years ago,

but it's message to us is just as important, and just as life or death as it was for them -- because every human being today is faced with the exact same temptation that those religious leaders were -- the temptation to reject God's Word, his messengers and his Son because we want to be the ones in control. Think about it -- God's Word, because it is perfect, holy, complete, and above everything, is bound to point out our flaws. It's bound to tell us things about ourselves that we'd rather not hear. So, how do you react when God's Word points out your sin? How do you react when someone like me -- a pastor, a teacher, or just a fellow Christian calls you on a particular failing -- a sinful word or action? Or a spiritual blind spot that you had been unaware of? How do you react when someone confronts your sin? That's God's messenger coming to you. Do you listen? Do you take that rebuke to heart? Or do you get angry - either in your words or actions telling yourself, "How dare that person correct me!" Do you smile and nod on the outside while killing that person in your heart? If that's how we think, we're no better than those wicked tenants who killed the prophets. We want to live how we want to live

At the same time we have to ask ourselves what we use to define whether or not we're right with God. How do you finish the sentence, "I'm right with God because..."? Do you complete it with something like "go to church" "give money or time to church", "help people", "vote a certain way in elections"? If we answer that question with anything other than "Jesus" we're like the Pharisees in Jesus' day who had invented their own form of righteousness that they could be confident in. If we do that, we're going to end up like the wicked tenants in Jesus day who sought to get rid of the Son because they had little need for a savior from sin. So Jesus, with this parable, is calling out to us and warning us against falling into the same sins and the same result, saying to us, "Don't do what they did and have the kingdom taken away from you too! Listen to me and live!"

And when we listen to Jesus, there's one more thing we see in this parable -- God's incredible patience and desire to save people from themselves. Consider the landowner. So the first round of servants is mistreated, and what does he do? He sends more! What landowner would do that? That round is also mistreated. So he sends his Son! What landowner in his right mind would do that? Only one who desperately wanted to save these wicked tenants from the destruction their own deeds were going to bring upon them. So God sent numerous prophets to his people in the centuries before Jesus. Time and time again he sent prophets even though they were rejected. Then he sent his Son. Even here, why is Jesus telling this parable? He's trying to save them from themselves! What great patience God has with us! God means it when he says, "**I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather that they turn from their ways and live.**" So when we have messed up and when we do mess up, God sends us messengers. He continues to call us back to him again and again -- either until we come back or until it's too late.

But even more than that, God takes our place in the consequences of our sin. It's interesting that when the Son comes, he isn't just killed, but thrown out first. He's treated like the one who was wretched. He's being treated the way that those wicked tenants deserved. And that's exactly what happened to Jesus, God's Son, on the cross. Jesus there received the wretched end that we deserved for being wretched sinners. And because Jesus did that, God has forgiven you and me of our spiritual arrogance. He's forgiven us of our never ending desire for control over our lives. He's forgiven us for all times that we ignored his will because we wanted to live the way we wanted to live. He's also forgiven us for all the ways

that we tried to control God and bribe him with our own goodness. In the cross, all that sin is sent away forever, like it's been hurled into the depths of the sea and never to be seen again.

In the last verse Jesus says that the kingdom will be given to those who produce its fruit -- and so, we ask, "what is that fruit?" It's simple. The fruit of the Kingdom is listening to Jesus. It's listening to Jesus as he speaks God's law to show and correct our sin. More importantly, it's listening to Jesus as he again and again shows himself to be our Savior from sin by his life, death, and resurrection. Listen to Jesus and live. AMEN!