

“A Parable About Determination”
by Rev. Frances Savill
Sunday October 15, 2023

Matthew 21:33-46

This morning’s parable is titled by the NRSV as “The parable of the wicked tenants”, and to some extent the parable does feature wicked tenants. But I think this parable is about much more – and I’ve chosen to call it “a parable about determination”.

Now, when you see a title for a sermon about determination, you might assume that the preacher is going to say something motivational about how we should be determined. Hopefully you’ve heard me say that, but that isn’t the point of this parable.

This parable isn’t about us and our determination – it’s about God, and God’s determination.

Listen to how the parable begins –

A landowner sets up a beautiful and complete vineyard.

He planted the vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Everything was complete – he hired tenants to take care of his property, and he waited for his investment to bear fruit.

When the harvest time came, the landowner sent servants to get the harvest. The Landowner sent one servant who was beaten and sent back empty handed, then he sent another, they killed him, and then he sent a third servant who they stoned. The picture painted is of this persistent Landowner, who won’t give in to the tenants and their violence. The Landowner has a plan for his property, and he will see that plan realized.

If we were all Jewish and steeped in the Hebrew scriptures of the Bible, what we sometimes call the Old Testament, Jesus’ parable would be more easily understood and there would be some things that we would recognize quite quickly.

First, is that God is easily recognized as the Landowner, and Israel is the vineyard. God's people were often compared to a vineyard, a planting of the Lord, that was to bear fruit, a harvest of righteousness to God. The planting of the Lord was to be a light to the nations, revealing who God was, to the whole world.

In Jesus' story there are a few things to notice, first consider the nature of the farm owner: God.

There is great patience shown, but also great persistence and determination. The owner took great care in planting and preparing; building a wine press, building the watch tower and wall, so that he would receive a harvest of wine. Wine in the Bible is the symbol of joy.

So, the landowner was determined to set things with his vineyard. He didn't abandon his fields, and nor will he let the farmhands, those left in charge, have the run of things.

The leaders of Israel, the farmhands, left in charge were again and again encouraged to do what was right, to fulfill the commitment they had made and give to God what was God's rightful share. They would not.

Even the son, the heir, of the farmer wasn't recognized. They took the heir out and killed him, seeing it as an opportunity to have the vineyard all to themselves.

This parable of Jesus' describes Jesus' situation. Jesus was about to be taken out and killed by those leaders left in charge of God's people.

So, Jesus asked, what will the vineyard owner of the story do? What will God do? The answer was, he will vindicate his son.

He will find new farm hands, new people to oversee God's people, who will respect the authority of the Father and the Son, and who will produce a harvest of righteousness and kingdom joy. God will accomplish his plans for his vineyard, for his people. The stone, the heir, that the religious leaders

were rejecting, would be God's cornerstone and they were being warned that God would replace them with faithful leaders.

So where does that leave us?

Well, we've been included now, in the vineyard, and together we've been charged with being a light to the nations, producing a harvest of righteousness and joy, acknowledging the authority and sovereignty of God the Father, and Jesus the Son.

As we consider this great planting of the Lord, of which we are part, how are we doing? Together, are we a light to the world? Together, are we producing a harvest of joy and righteousness? What does the world see of the church?

God has this incredible vision for who we are supposed to be - are we living into it? I would say we are.

There are dozens and dozens of people who come to this building week after week, who find hope here. We welcome several different recovery groups, and they are cared for, and given a safe place to meet and support each other. This church makes a difference in their lives.

And all of you support many people here in this community, and in many places in the world. There is a harvest of joy, and many people give thanks to God for you and the good things you do in Jesus' name.

We gathered on Saturday morning a few weeks ago and thought about God's vision is for this part of God's vineyard. My question was not so much is there "more" we could do, but are we using our gifts and talents, and passion in the best ways, the ways God intends for us. I hope and pray that all of you are still considering that question.

In the parable, the wicked tenants kill the son of the Landlord – so they can take over. It reminds me very much the people today who claimed to have killed God, or that God is dead.

In the Scripture, Jesus asks the question about the fate of the wicked tenants who kill the Son of the Landlord. The answer is that the Landlord will seek revenge on them and replace them with new tenants who will take care of the vineyard and will produce fruit.

But in the gospel story, what do we see? We know that God does entrust his vineyard to others who will bear fruit, but he doesn't cast off those wicked tenants and destroy them.

In fact, the dying words of the Son are "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." The death of the Son opens the way to life and forgiveness even for the wicked tenants and all those who are like them.

The Landlord again and again calls his people to bear fruit, to learn his ways that lead to life, to learn the first commandment: "I am the Lord your God."

When we are faithless, when we are hardhearted, when God's people won't listen, and destroy even the beloved Son of God, God raises up new witnesses, but God also opens the door to forgiveness and hope.

This is the message that we have been entrusted with.

We have been raised up as God's people, to serve God's mission in the world, to live God's word and continue to produce an abundant harvest that will bless God's world. There's a lot we are doing together...

God has big plans for us, for this part of his vineyard.

Remember the determination of the Landlord. God does not plant, and then leave us on our own. God does not give up on His people, nor does He give in to the violent and faithless.

Have no doubt that our God and King is going to set things right. Have no doubt that God is going to accomplish His good plans for God's world. Have no doubt that you are producing a harvest for the Lord.

Thanks be to God.