

Weekend of Sunday, October 4, 2020
18th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 27/Proper 22/Year A
First Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7
Second Reading: Philippians 3:4b-14
Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:33-46
Sermon Title: “*The Difference Between Knowing and Doing*”

Theme

Jesus tells a parable to the religious leaders who are plotting his death, revealing that their plans will, ironically, bring about the fulfillment of scripture.

Text

[Jesus said to the people:] ³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes’?

⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Sermon

This week's Gospel Reading follows last week's directly and so the audience is the same. As a reminder, Jesus was teaching in the Temple the day after he rode into Jerusalem in a glorious procession lined with crowds of people shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

And then, according to Matthew, Jesus went to the Temple and purged it of the money changers and the merchants. Then at the conclusion of last week's reading, we found Jesus in the Temple the next morning, Monday morning of Holy Week, and the chief priests and the elders of the people confront him by questioning him about his authority to do the things he had been doing.

The Gospel Reading for today is the same conversation, so the context is still Monday of Holy Week, and the dialogue is between Jesus and the chief priests and the elders of the people. No doubt, his Disciples were present along with other Jewish pilgrims who were in town for the Passover, but they were merely observers of this dialogue.

So that conversation continues in today's Gospel Reading and Jesus continued with a parable, the parable of the vineyard. You heard it, a landowner developed some land into a vineyard. We can just imagine him turning the soil, and maybe fertilizing it. He put a fence around it to keep other people and maybe rodents out. He even dug a winepress to process his grapes. Then he hired tenants to maintain the vineyard and left town. Come harvest time, he sent servants to collect his yield. But one of those servants was killed and another beaten and sent away.

The vineyard owner sent other servants and those servants were also treated badly by the tenants.

Finally, the vineyard owner sends his own son with the thought that those no good tenants will surely not disrespect his own son. But yet, the evil tenants, who want the landowner's investment for themselves, killed the son too.

Jesus concluded the parable by posing a question to his audience. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

Full of self-righteousness, the audience agrees, ⁴¹“He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

Well, what the audience of chief priests and elders of the people did not see coming, was that Jesus was telling this parable about them. God is the landowner, they, the chief priests, and the elders of the people are those God left in charge of his investment, and the patriarchs, prophets, kings, and judges are those servants whom God sent to collect the yield, and Jesus himself, is, of course, the son of the landowner. Without as much detail, Jesus flatly condemned their mismanagement of God's Kingdom, and for that their contempt for him grew. Next week, Jesus' fiery condemnation will continue in a sermon I have entitled, "The Banquest is Ready," but that is for next week.

The First Reading from Isaiah contains the same message. Isaiah concluded the First Reading by writing:

⁷For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!

By the first century when this Gospel Reading took place, this passage from Isaiah 5 would have probably been 700 years old and they, the chief priests and the elders of the people should have been familiar with it, and maybe even heeded the warning that is leveled directly at them, and yet they don't. I think it is a fair judgment of us to observe that they should have known better, which should have lead them to do better, but they didn't. Aren't they just like people?

Last week I told you that I thought the real issue in the dialogue was power and authority – who has it legitimately. Of course, the chief priests and the elders of the people think they do or they wouldn't feel threatened by Jesus. But through this

parable this week, Jesus claimed authentic authority. He is the Son of God, though they had not accepted that.

How about you? I am not asking about the people not in worship this weekend. I am not speaking about the majority of unchurched people in our community who are driving by one church after another while we worship. I care about them, you should too, but they are the ones who, arguably don't know any better – which is a different problem for a different day. No, my concern today is you, those for whom I have pastoral responsibility.

We have the benefit of knowing Jesus Christ personally through scripture and our devotional lives, by divine inspiration, and through the fellowship of the faithful, the church. There should be no discussion of who has authority over our lives. When we confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord of our lives, then by definition, we acknowledge his authority over all matters of our lives. Although our lives are a gift that God gives us to steward – to take care of with godly behavior, we are no longer in charge. Jesus is. And knowing better, through scripture and our devotional lives, by divine inspiration and through the fellowship of the faithful, the church, we should do better.

And just so you are clear, I am not talking about score-keeping, how often we do the right thing. We all mess up from time to time. We cannot beat ourselves up for that.

For example, the apostle Paul, the author of the letter to the Philippians, wrote about his impeccable credentials.

- He was circumcised on the 8th day because that is what God commanded according to Levitical law.
- He was not just a member of the people of Israel – it was possible to convert to Judaism – but his pedigree was that he was a Benjaminite, born of Hebrew parents.
- A Pharisee, meaning he was one of those overly religious Jews who spent too much time studying the Law instead of getting to know the giver of the Law.
- He called himself "zealous" meaning fanatical, even obsessive

- A persecutor of the church before his conversion – why would he do that? Because he loved his version of Judaism so much he was willing to kill those he thought were contaminating it. In Paul's mind, as Saul before his conversion, he had convinced himself that persecuting Christians even to death was a God-pleasing activity.
- And finally, ironically, he considered himself, blameless and righteous under the Law. Really, Paul, I mean Saul! You were a cold-hearted killer, a bounty hunter for the god of your own creation!

His big mistake that he readily acknowledged in the Second Reading was that he did not know Christ Jesus as his Lord. But then, in his letter to the Philippians, he acknowledged that all that he thought he had going for himself was rubbish. All that law-keeping, all that fanaticism, his pedigree, even his willingness to kill infidels for God – he acknowledged was just rubbish.

Paul had a divine encounter with the resurrected Lord Jesus, but after that, he was fed daily the same way we can be if we allow it - through scripture and our devotional lives, by divine inspiration, and through the fellowship of the faithful, the church. And through that, Paul came to the awareness of the ⁸"surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord."

Wow! What a powerful story of conversion!

Now, speaking only for myself, I never had that kind of dramatic conversion. Some have had a dramatic conversion from a life without Christ to a life with Christ. I have been a Christian all my life. But neither situation means we are done and complete. The godly life of the disciple is a daily decision and struggle of which we are never done, this side of the grave. And so, as Paul said, we ¹⁴"press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

In the prayer of the day moments ago we prayed, "Lead us by the inspiration of your Spirit to know those things that are right, and by your merciful guidance, help us to do them." Brothers and sisters in Christ, let that be our life's goal, for the prize is worth the effort. Not for the sake of adding spiritual stars to some fictitious chart

we believe is being kept in heaven, but because God revealed in Jesus Christ loves us so much. For his sake, we honor him when we know better and do better.

Prayer

Beloved God, from you come all things that are good. Lead us by the inspiration of your Spirit to know those things that are right, and by your merciful guidance, help us to do them, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.