

## Luke 20:9-20

Lent 5C + April 7, 2019

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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A Parable of Curious Decisions

The Word of the Lord from Luke 20:17: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

This is a parable of curious decisions and ridiculous reasoning.

Run through the story and you see what I mean. A man plants a vineyard – no small task, leases it to tenants and then goes off to a far country for a long time. When it's time for the harvest, he sends a servant to collect payment, which seems only fair. So far, so good; but now the story starts to go off the rails. Instead of paying the rent, the tenants beat the servant and send him away empty-handed, which, I would think, voids the lease. In one action, the tenants have forfeited their right to be in the vineyard, they've assaulted a man, and – in assaulting the one sent by the owner – they've disrespected the owner too. It's time for some law and order.

But rather than a show of force, the owner sends another servant, whom the tenants also beat, treat shamefully and send away empty-handed. Still failing to respond aggressively, he then sends a third servant, whom they also wound and cast out. Do they prepare to flee? Nah. They continue to occupy the vineyard like it belongs to them.

You know the old saying: "Fool me once, your fault. Beat up three of my servants, and maybe I should change tactics." The owner of this vineyard sounds foolishly patient, and these tenants aren't going to change. Obviously, a show of force is necessary; but the owner still doesn't opt for a show of force. Instead, he says, "I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him."

Perhaps. More likely, not. If the whole point is to prosecute the tenants, the owner still isn't making sense.

Not that the tenants are making a ton of sense, either: these are not criminal masterminds. Who in their right mind thinks, "Now that we've leased the vineyard, let's solidify our business by beating the stuffing out of the owner's servants"? Worse, far worse, who would see the son coming and think it's a good idea to say, "This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours"?

It's like the owner and the tenants are having a contest to see who can make worst decisions.

Sure enough, when the son arrives to visit the vineyard, the tenants kill him: specifically, they throw him out of the vineyard and kill him outside. They do so expecting the owner's approval! They expect to inherit the vineyard. But now the owner's tactics change: now, *finally*, he comes and destroys the tenants, then gives the vineyard to others.

It's a strange story where nobody acts sensibly. Or, maybe if you've been hanging around Sunday Bible class for the past couple of weeks, you're thinking, "Maybe Jesus is telling a right-hand kingdom story in a left-hand kingdom setting. Hmmm."

We're not quite done with weirdness yet: by the time the owner wipes out the tenants, you'd expect Jesus' hearers to be saying, "Well, it's about time!" But they don't! Instead they respond, "Surely

not!" What? They're aghast that the owner would destroy the tenants who wound his servants and kill his son?

They *are* aghast, which tells you that they've been tracking. Jesus frames the story in a vineyard because He's playing off of Isaiah 5: the vineyard is Jerusalem, Israel signified by one city; and the chief priests and the scribes are the tenants. The servants are the prophets: and no one can deny that the Israelites of old – who wounded and even killed the prophets – should have received them instead, since rejecting them eventually led to massacre by the Assyrians and Babylonians.

The beloved son of the father in the parable is, of course, Jesus. Despite how they've treated His servants the prophets, the Father has sent His Son to His people in the vineyard one more time – not to knock heads together, but to call them to repentance. And, really, if the only-begotten Son of God has become flesh to walk among them, teach them and perform all sorts of miracles, should they not respect the Son?

And yet, the answer is no. This parable is also prophecy about to be fulfilled. Jesus tells this story a day or two before His crucifixion. He quotes Psalm 118 to warn them that they should respect the Son: He is the cornerstone of God's people, and they will be crushed if they reject Him. This prophecy, then, is also a warning and a call to repentance, lest they be like foolish tenants who think that God will reward them for killing the Son.

How do the scribes and chief priests respond to this warning? They could say, "We can prove Jesus is wrong by not killing Him!" But evildoers are gonna do evil, so they work all the harder to arrange His betrayal and death. Within 48 hours, they will cast the beloved Son outside of the city, take Him to a hill called Golgotha and jeer as He is crucified. And for the murder of the Son, they will expect the Father to reward them. They expect they will inherit the kingdom of heaven. It will not be so.

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"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Jesus is quoting Psalm 118:22 when He says this. In turn, you will echo Him soon, on Easter Sunday, and you will add the next verse of the psalm: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. *This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes!*" The Lord has used such evil for good; for though His enemies meant only to get rid of Him, His death was for your salvation.

Rejoice in that, repent of your sin and heed this warning: it is easy to marvel at the absurdity of the tenants' thought process. Who would ever think they could abuse God's prophets and reject His Son, and in doing so earn God's love and favor? Who would ever be so foolish?

The answer is ... anyone with a sinful nature.

How many church bodies today reject God's Word and then claim God's favor? How many mistake His patience for approval of wickedness? The landscape is littered with churches that have rejected God's law and His condemnation of sin, claiming that God delights in all sorts of sin – and that God in turn frowns upon the likes of you because you're those stick-in-the-mud Christians who say that sin is still sin in need of forgiveness. To say that God now approves of sin is to reject the Word of God; and if you reject the Word of God inspired (meaning Scripture), you will also reject the Word of God incarnate – namely, Jesus. Jesus did not suffer God's wrath for sin so that His Father would turn around and say, "My bad! My Son's cross sure taught Me that sin isn't so bad after all!" He paid that price because your sin would otherwise condemn you. To embrace sin and say that Jesus approves is to be as foolish as the tenants in the parable: it is to reject the Son – as well as His sacrifice – and expect God to reward you for doing so.

The same wicked tenant dwells in you as long as you have a sinful nature. Sure, you're a Christian, but your old Adam still works you over; and with the help of the devil, he gets you thinking that you certainly don't want to reject Christ outright, but you sure would like Him to cut you some slack ... so you start to create scenarios in your mind where it's okay to be angry, or impatient, or covetous, or lustful, or unforgiving, or discontented, or whatever. When you persuade yourself that, as a Christian, it's okay to commit these sins, you have persuaded yourself that God must approve of them. You certainly don't take His wrath for sin seriously, right? At such times, you have now become the wicked tenant, rejecting the Son and expecting God to reward you for your rebellion.

On the bright side, when you reject Jesus, you don't kill Him. You can't: He has died and He is risen, never to die again. He's invincible. On the not-so-bright side, you're killing yourself. Unless you repent, you will be crushed on the Last Day; and eternity is a terribly long time to mourn your foolishness, especially since you knew better.

Repent. Repent while it is still day, for you also know this good news: remember how foolishly patient and merciful was the owner of the vineyard to the tenants? While you are still foolish in your imitation of the wicked tenants, God the Father is still "foolishly" abundant in grace and mercy toward you. As He sent forth His Word to His people time and time again, so He still puts His Word into your ears now. As He sent His beloved incarnate Son into the vineyard, body-blood-and-all for your redemption, so He delivers His risen Son to you, body-blood-and-all for your salvation here.

The beloved Son was rejected, but He has become the cornerstone of the Church – the Church into which He has gathered you. Repent of your sins and rejoice in His mercy, for on Christ the cornerstone, the vineyard is yours forever.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen