

The Parable of Those Who Wanted God's Gifts All for Themselves

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday in Lent (Reminiszere)

Sermon Text: Mark 12:1-12



And He began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country. ² When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. ³ And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵ And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. ⁶ He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ⁷ But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' ⁸ and they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. ⁹ What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Have you not read this Scripture: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; ¹¹ this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" ¹² And they were seeking to arrest Him but feared the people, for they perceived that He had told the parable against them. So they left Him and went away.

When Jesus went to Jerusalem at that time, there was great excitement throughout the city. You could hear the excited buzz of conversation coming from all the corners and alleyways of the city. Some whispered, some argued fiercely, others shouted their displeasure in loud voices and angrily left the gathering. What was the issue in Jerusalem at that time when people were discussing Jesus? Why all the excitement about Him? It was solely about the question of who Jesus was. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey, some expected a political Messiah who would turn the world upside. Jesus turned the world on its head but not in the way they had envisioned. He did the unthinkable – He went into the Temple and drove out the money changers. "You have made My Father's house into a den of robbers!" Jesus exclaimed – an incredibly bold action. And that's why the question, who is Jesus, is all the more important. Some denounced Him saying, He is a false prophet, He broke the Sabbath, He partnered with Satan to heal the sick! And next to them were many who said: He is the Messiah who is to come. That's what it was like in Jerusalem back then. Today, more than 2000 year later, the question about the person of Jesus is still a hot topic and the discussions are going on to this day. Some say that Jesus was a normal person and try to prove by any means possible, that Jesus was nothing more than an ordinary person. Others say that He is a prophet. And in the western world at least, there is a dwindling number that say Jesus is truly God's Son! The question about Jesus is no small matter – not an insignificant event in the hot Israeli sun but the question that determines our destiny like no other question in world history: So who was Jesus? Who is Jesus?

At that time in Jerusalem, when the entire city was in upheaval, Jesus answered this question as a parable. The parable is unparalleled in its clarity. Jesus made use of an age-old story that was familiar from the Old Testament. Back then, Isaiah first used this image of God being like a vineyard owner who tended it with great patience, effort, and love. Yet it didn't bring forth the hoped for fruit. In this Old Testament example, the parable wanted to point out God's unending patience towards the people of Israel. The people didn't bring forth the desired good fruit but reacted with opposition and rebellion against God's love and mercy. Jesus' contemporaries knew this parable inside and out. Jesus now uses this same parable and expanded on it. In Jesus' parable, God is and remains the vineyard owner who does everything necessary for the vineyard to bring forth fruit. When He sent the servants to get some of the harvested fruit, the tenants beat and mistreated the servants one by one and sent them back. At this point, we already notice that the parable intentionally makes us shake our heads. Everyone who was listening at the time had to have asked: what vineyard owner does something like that? Everyone knows that at the faintest hint of rebellion, a normal vineyard owner would call upon the entire strength of the military to bring down the evil tenants. In Jesus' parable, the vineyard owner doesn't do that. In all patience, he continuously sends more and more servants. Everyone who heard that knew who He was talking about – it's God. Only God has such unending patience, only God hopes where there is no more hope. And this is exactly what God did when He sent one prophet after another throughout history – many of them were even killed. But the parable of Jesus

gets even more absurd because finally, the vineyard owner does the unthinkable and sends His own Son. Who does something like that? The answer is: only God does that. The tenants immediately recognized the Son. There is no question about who He is. They know that He is the heir. For them, there is no doubt that He is the rightful heir, that is God's Son, and in their delusion, they think that they could seize the inheritance by killing the heir. Jesus' contemporaries at the time understood very well who Jesus is. Jesus unmistakably declares that He is the heir. Yes, He is more important than all the prophets who came before. He is God's Son. He is the true heir. And that's exactly why they killed Him. They wouldn't and couldn't accept Him. They couldn't accept God. By killing Jesus, the people in Jerusalem didn't just kill a pitiful human being, but they rebelled against God the Creator.

Jesus' parable doesn't just shock those listening back then, it also moves us deeply today because the parable clearly explains God's mercy and contrasts this mercy with human rebellion in general. The parable explains that God, knowing full well what will happen, sends His only Son anyway. Why? He gives away His beloved Son so that all people can come to know Him. The long history of God's patience for His people is accompanied with great suffering. And in stark contrast to that is human nature. The parable wants to tell us: this is how people are, this is how we act towards God, and what happens when God falls into the hands of man can be seen on the cross of Jesus. Jesus exposes the intentions of the people at that time and not only that. He also exposes us because we don't want the true heir either. We don't want the vineyard to remain God's. We don't want God to rule over us. And all our efforts over the centuries have been to prevent God from approaching us and asking where His property is. The question of what belongs to God refers first of all to life in general and to all the blessings that we have received from God's hand. But it also refers to the Church in a special way because the Church is today's vineyard which God has provided for us. The Church is today's vineyard from which God always eagerly expects fruit. And each one of us must ask the question: What are we doing with God's vineyard? And what we do in the church, do we do that for ourselves or for God? As tenants, God wants us to use His gifts. He wants us to bear fruit. And He demands that from us! Unfortunately, we are often like the evil tenants in this story. Yes, we too have become so accustomed to doing whatever we want with God's gifts. We have become accustomed to God's goodness. After all, God isn't doing anything about it, or so we think. So we are careless with even the most expensive of all gifts – we take what Jesus gave us in the Church just for ourselves as if it belonged only to us! As a result, we have stolen God's vineyard and are the evil tenants from the parable!

The parable ends with the battered heir whose corpse lies before the gates of the city. And yet, the story doesn't end there. The melody of mercy also doesn't end with the battered body of Jesus outside the city gates. To tell you the truth, the melody of mercy actually begins there. When asked how God should react to people who have done all these things, Jesus gives an unusual answer. He looks now to what will happen next in His life, He looks now to His resurrection. Yes, God won't let everything stay this way. That's true. But God's answer is not that He just kills the tenants. His answer is to take the dead Son out of the garbage heap – the Son will not remain where we have thrown Him. Jesus finishes the parable with a proverb from the Old Testament: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Unlike in the Old Testament parable about the vineyard, the vineyard in Jesus' parable will still bear fruit. It would also bear fruit apart from the tenants. Jesus used the example of the cornerstone to explain all this. We have rejected Jesus as useless. We have abused Jesus as the new lawgiver. We have cheated Jesus of what is His. And yet, God takes Him out of the garbage and brings Him to His rightful place. Jesus alone is the cornerstone! Jesus is the only one who has brought forth a hundred percent of the fruit that God actually requires from us. Jesus was truly obedient to God – He gave all of Himself, without restraint and without limits, for the wicked – as illustrated by His death on the cross. And God raises Him up again! God raises Jesus up and places Him in His rightful place where He will call us. Amen.