

9 He began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, leased it to some tenant farmers, and went away on a journey for a long time. 10 When it was the right time, he sent a servant to the tenants to collect his share of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenant farmers beat the servant and sent him away empty-handed. 11 The man went ahead and sent yet another servant, but they also beat him, treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. 12 He then sent yet a third. They also wounded him and threw him out. 13 The owner of the vineyard said, ‘What should I do? I will send my son, whom I love. Perhaps they will respect him.’ 14 “But when the tenant farmers saw him, they talked it over with one another. They said, ‘This is the heir. Let’s kill him, so that the inheritance will be ours.’ 15 They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. So what will the owner of the vineyard do to them? 16 He will come and destroy those tenant farmers and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “May it never be!” 17 But he looked at them and said, “Then what about this that is written: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone? 18 “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush the one on whom it falls.” 19 That very hour the chief priests and the experts in the law began looking for a way to lay hands on him, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.

Vincent Van Gogh was known as an impressionist type of painter. He didn’t paint with exact lines. He seemed to use blotches in a sense, and his paintings had a soft and gentle feel to them. Today Jesus paints for us another picture in the form of a parable, and it is not the soft and peaceful landscape of a sunset over a farmer’s field. It’s a violent and striking picture of violence and rebellion, meant to raise the eyebrows and shock the listeners and warn them of what was to come. As we look at this picture in the season of Lent, it is a harsh reminder to sinfulness of human nature and a call to repentance.

Jesus Paints a Sharp, Simple and Deep Message of Repentance

The farmers were symbolic of the chief priests and the experts in the law. They were the spiritual leaders of the Jews, especially in Jerusalem. These guys had a pretty nice gig in some senses. They were able to tell the people exactly how to behave, with exact rules about how to walk and how to talk and how to wear their clothes and dress their hair. They were lawyers, in a sense. I assume that they were compensated nicely from the offerings of the temple treasury so that they could wear fine clothes and live in nice houses. But in the midst of all of their amenities they never seemed to get down to actually making any sacrifices or preaching the word. They didn’t call the people to repent of their sins and prepare for a Messiah to come. They turned their religion into a business of sorts. They kind of remind me of career politicians who love the title but don’t really ever seem to do what they’re supposed to be doing.

The religious leaders were very protective of the whole system they had in place. When John and then Jesus came in and actually expounded on the Word and called people to repent, they felt threatened by these religious type of hicks. They especially didn’t like how Jesus mocked some of their laws and overturned the money changers tables in the temple. They felt threatened by them. Some were even calling Jesus the Messiah. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead they said,

“What are we going to do, because this man is doing many miraculous signs? 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. Then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” (John 11)

So they plotted for how to get rid of Jesus. I imagine if Jesus had just kept quiet or stayed up north He wouldn't have had such problems. But they needed to repent too, so Jesus spoke this parable primarily against them.

A part of me can understand the response of the teachers of the law. If we had a younger pastor come into our circuit who seemed to be a hotshot and who told us how to preach and how we were doing things wrong, I might bristle as well. The same would probably ring true if a lay person came in and told me everything I was doing wrong. I would probably think to myself, “Who does he think he is?” But if he was able to expound on the Word of God and show from the Word where we were wrong and how we could or should be doing things, I would hope that I would have the humility to at least listen to what he or she had to say.

The chief priests and teachers of the law were in it for the business of it. When it comes to how we do church here at Trinity as well, we need to be careful that this doesn't just become a business for us. We obviously have budgets to meet and there is wisdom in how we take on expenses and pay bills. Yet at the heart and core of our ministry we want to center our ministry on the Word of God. If we measure our church merely by whether we are getting our bills paid, if our school is growing, or even if people are happy and thriving here, it really isn't necessarily what God is looking for. Church is more than successful programs and happy people. It's about being faithful with the Word of God so that there is a continual repentance of sins and clinging to Jesus for forgiveness. The leaders of the Jews weren't getting that. You can see that through the parable.

The landowner could have sent an army down to collect his share of the vineyard if he wanted to. But he decided to only send one servant at a time. Why not a show of force? It shows us the nature of God. He didn't want the people to feel forced into doing it. He wanted them to show him respect without being forced into it. So he allowed them to have the power to say “no” to his servants. God allows us to say “no.” He doesn't always threaten us with a club over our heads. He left it up to their consciences and the very fact that the farm wasn't theirs to begin with. As the parable shows the landowner working through simple servants, it reminds me of how God likes to work through pastors and teachers and parents and children. He doesn't work through armies and guns and knives. He works through words.

But they wouldn't listen to mere words. So every time the landowner sent another servant, their behavior went from bad to worse. They started with beating the first servant and tossing him out. Then they beat and humiliated the next one. Then they literally “traumatized” (according to the Greek) the third one and left him with lasting scars. They were hell bent on keeping everything for themselves. It seems as if they were trying to intimidate the landowner and threaten him not to send any more.

It's the way the sinful nature works. When you get away with something and people see it, your sinful nature becomes emboldened. It's what happens with politicians. It happens with priests and bishops and pastors. It happens with spoiled spouses and children. It's the ugly nature of sin. When you allow someone to sinfully go on unchecked, he usually becomes more and more demanding and more difficult to live with.

The owner of the vineyard said, ‘What should I do? I will send my son, whom I love. Perhaps they will respect him.’ It seems almost foolish, doesn't it? Why in the world would you send your son after they've just

abused the last three guys? Well, it shows his patience. It shows his hope. But he says why. **“I love him.”** Since the owner had a special care for this son, and they knew this, then maybe they would act differently. But the tenants in this parable are a special sort of greedy and evil. They do even worse to him. **They said, ‘This is the heir. Let’s kill him, so that the inheritance will be ours.’** This is, of course, a picture of what they did to Jesus, the Son of God, whom God said at His baptism “I love.” All for what? So they could keep their positions of authority over the people and shut Jesus up.

A nice, soft spoken counselor is called in order to help a couple through their difficulties. He has a drinking problem. He likes to use his authority over his wife to sometimes almost bully her and demean her. Yet he comes to church and is faithful in worship. He seems like a good guy to everyone in church. But in private, he does not behave the way that Jesus said that a man should love and take care of his wife. There are issues. The counselor speaks softly. He tries to understand where the man is coming from. He also listens to the wife. The sin is obvious. The wife hopes he will respect their pastor. But when confronted, the husband feels cornered. He doesn’t like being confronted over his behavior. He likes the authority he has established for himself. So what happens? He raises his voice. He yells at the pastor and the wife. He gets angry and storms out of the door. All for what? For power and control over his wife? Women can do the same thing. What is the inheritance? Alcohol? Foolish spending? Laziness? The same sins with different faces.

When they heard this, they said, “May it never be!” That’s the way we typically think. “I would NEVER do such a thing.” We might even vow never to do it again. But there was nothing the people could do about it. It was inevitable. God had predicted it back in Psalm 118. The leaders would stumble over the stumbling block of Jesus. They couldn’t handle a weak Messiah. They didn’t like a sympathetic Christ. They were too blinded by their own hatred to take the warning.

How many are on the same path? How many in here will end up having abandoned the faith? How many will end up divorced? How many will be unable to hold a job? How many will be alienated from their church or their family after having been warned? It’s not a matter of self will. When you stop listening to your conscience or your Christian friends calling you to repentance, it is inevitable.

So what will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenant farmers and give the vineyard to others.” God WANTS you to repent of your sins. He WANTS you to succeed in your marriage. He wants you to get a good job and be productive. He wants you to come and receive the Word and sacrament. But don’t mistake that with the idea that God NEEDS you. He was willing to move on from the Jewish leadership, and hand the kingdom on to other races and other generations. It didn’t take long. In 70 A.D. the temple was destroyed and leveled to the ground. The Jewish leaders were taken captive or put to death. They were destroyed and sent to hell. God moved on from them. God will move on from you too if you decide to reject Him. If you don’t want to repent of your sinful spending, you will end up broke. If you don’t want end your drinking and you keep on getting drunk, it will catch up with you. You will lose your family. You will become a liar. You will lose your friends. You will lose your faith. It is inevitable without repentance.

I wish this story had a happily after, but it didn’t. **19 That very hour the chief priests and the experts in the law began looking for a way to lay hands on him, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.** Instead of repenting, they only dug in their heels and tried to kill

Him. Instead of fearing the almighty God that they claimed to worship, they only feared the people. But the good news is that Jesus didn't back down from telling them what they needed to hear, just because they wanted to kill Him. So maybe there's the good news then? God doesn't tell us what we need to hear. He tells us what we need to hear. Why? Because He wants us to repent and turn to Him for forgiveness and salvation. The ironic thing is that by digging in their heels and killing Jesus, they enabled Him to fulfill His promise of forgiveness and salvation. Through their hell bent hatred, God ended up showing His love and mercy.

So maybe we could compare this portrait to what the artist Tom Deininger does. He makes portraits out of junk. It looks like a normal painting, but when you get closer it is actually a three dimensional sculpture that is made out of toys and other items. It's much more complex than you think.

There's a simplicity to this parable that Jesus speaks. It's a simple condemnation of the chief priests and the teachers of the law for their selfishness and greed over the temple and the people. They are rotten people that won't listen to anyone. But when you dig deeper you also see hidden behind the words, a loving God who is willing to tell the truth and willing to die for the truth. It's a loving call to repentance. It's a beautiful thing. The consequence of drawing this picture was that Jesus was crucified by the people He was trying to save. But the result was also that Jesus died for their sins and for our also. We take the message at face value. Repent. We look deeper and see what Jesus did for proud and selfish people. He died for them too. So we listen. We repent. We believe, and we hope. Jesus Paints a Sharp, Simple and Deep Message of Repentance. Amen.