

19th Sunday after Pentecost A 08 October 2023

Matthew 21:33-46

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God who is love: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus said], "It's story time and I want you to pay attention because it's about you" ("Listen to another parable"). Let's pray: ...

Jesus said to them, "Listen to another parable." He could have just said, "Get ready for another dust-up you brood of vipers." Regardless of what we think about the Pharisees we have to acknowledge that they understood what Jesus was saying to them. They heard Jesus. "They realised he was talking about them." Jesus held up a mirror of truth to the Pharisees; and they didn't like the reflection. They didn't like it and they wanted to put a stop to it. They wanted to arrest him.

This is neither Jesus' first nor his last confrontation with the Pharisees. We tend to avoid people with whom we have conflict and confrontation, whereas Jesus just keeps on coming. He capitalises on every opportunity that offends, aggravates, and confronts the Pharisees. Jesus eats with the wrong people. He hangs out with the wrong crowd. He answers the Pharisees' questions with questions, if at all. He taunts them by breaking the law and healing on the Sabbath. He calls them hypocrites, blind leaders, snakes. He escapes their traps. He leaves them dumbfounded. He rattles off a string of "woes" against them. He compares them to disobedient sons who won't work in the vineyard. They just can't catch a break with Jesus. He's relentless.

So, what's that all about? Why can't Jesus just "let it go"? Why is Jesus so intense and determined in his encounters with the Pharisees? And, what does all this have to do with us?

Jesus seems to relish any opportunity to pick a fight with the Pharisees. Is his primary motivation to expose and condemn those who don't follow him? Is he keeping score by pointing out all of the attitudes and behaviours of the Pharisees that he considers wrong? Is Jesus trying to exclude the religious leaders of his day from God's kingdom? Those who challenge Christ's divinity will often use this position to defame Jesus, but, we know that Jesus isn't driven by pride or a will to win. That's simply not his nature. So, what is it with Jesus and the way he deals with the Pharisees?

Here's what I think these confrontations are about. Jesus, out of his overflowing capacity and will for love and life to reign, is unwilling to give up on the Pharisees, or anyone else for that matter. Jesus is unwilling to give up on you or me. He just keeps on coming. That's the good news, hope, and joy in today's parable. This isn't a parable of exclusion or condemnation; rather, it's a parable of Jesus' dogged determination and unwillingness to give up on love. His unwillingness to give up on us often confronts us with truth about our lives that's more often than not difficult to hear and accept. We might hear his words but do we realise he's talking about us?

This parable and the confrontation this parable evokes, are like a mirror held before us so that we might see and recognise in ourselves what Jesus sees and recognises. This isn't to condemn us but to rescue us from the places of our self-exclusion, to call us back to life, and to lead us home.

Jesus doesn't exclude us or anyone else from the kingdom of God (the scriptures tell us that he died for all [Romans 6:10; Corinthians 5:14,15]). We do it to ourselves and we're pretty good at it. That's what the Pharisees have done. The Pharisees have excluded themselves.

"The kingdom of God will be taken away from you," Jesus says to them. This is less a warning about the consequence for failing to produce kingdom fruits than it's a statement of recognition of what already is. They were given the vineyard and failed to produce and share the fruits of the kingdom. Jesus is just naming the reality, the truth. They have excluded themselves. In the same way, the kingdom of God will be given to those who are already producing kingdom fruits. This is a recognition of what already is. Where the fruit is, there also the kingdom exists.

If you want to know what the fruits of the kingdom look like then look at the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ. What do you see? Love, intimacy, mercy, forgiveness, justice, generosity, kindness, compassion, presence, wisdom, truth, healing, reconciliation, self-surrender, joy, thanksgiving, peace, obedience, humility, hope, and faith. These are the lived realities in the vineyards of our lives.

Our vineyards are the people, relationships, circumstances and events of our lives that God has entrusted to our care. That means our spouse and marriage, children and family, our work, our church, our daily decisions and choices, our hopes, dreams, and concerns, are the vineyards in which we are to reveal the presence and life of God, to produce the fruits of the kingdom. The vineyards, our work in those vineyards, and the fruit produced, come together to show us to be sharers in God's kingdom; or not.

The degree to which we aren't producing kingdom fruit is the degree to which we have excluded ourselves from and forfeited our share in the kingdom. We are living neither as the people God knows us to be nor as the people we truly want to be. That's the truth with which Jesus confronted the Pharisees. It's the same truth Jesus confronts us with every day.

What does self-exclusion look like? How does it happen? Here are some questions for you to think about.

- Do you ever struggle with perfectionism, self-condemnation, and the question of whether you're enough?
- Do you ever feel like you have to be in control, be right, have all the answers?
- Are you carrying grudges, anger, resentment?
- Do you look at others and begin making judgements about their belief, choices, or lifestyle?
- Are there people in your life that you have chosen to let go of rather than do the work of reconciliation and heal the relationship, as far as it is possible?
- Do you go through life on auto-pilot, going through the motions but never really being present, never showing up?
- Is there more criticism and cynicism in your life than thanksgiving and celebration?
- Are you hanging onto some old guilt that you believe is beyond forgiveness?

You'll notice that all of the emphasis is inwardly focused on ourselves, our inner ego, our wants, needs, feelings. You'll also notice that these things leave no room for Jesus. But there's no "I" in Jesus; there's only "us".

The antidote to our self-exclusion from God's kingdom begins with first acknowledging and accepting that we have excluded ourselves by our self-indulgence. It sounds like a no-brainer, but honest, self-reflection and admission of selfishness, neglect, sin, call it what you will, isn't so easy to do. Then, we need to repent and re-enter the mission fields that God calls us to inhabit. In his marvellous love, God has overcome all of the grief we have caused him through Jesus' sacrificial love on the cross. When we remember this and commit our thoughts, words, and deeds to serving God's will rather than our own, we will again be thrilled with the overwhelming privilege it is to be a tenant in God's vineyard, shouldering the burden with fellow saints, labouring to harvest God his fruits - the salvation of souls.

This is all outward focused and involves us working together as the body of Christ.

And as much as anything else, I want you to know and believe this. Jesus will never give up on you. Hear again his promise: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27,28). Jesus can't give up on you. So don't give up on yourself. God is always graciously opening doors for exciting mission work in his vineyard, so let's respond with a joyous, grateful, praise-filled, "Yes!" and claim the riches of his glorious, eternal inheritance in heaven. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. amen.