

Sermon, October 4, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome our good friends Debi and Sean Beachy who are providing Special Music. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases, COVID hospitalizations and deaths are still rising, and many, if not most of our members are either in high-risk groups, or they spend time with friends and family members who are.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you have friends or family members who do not have internet service, you can easily record this service on your laptop and sit down and share it with them. I would be glad to show you how. Even if they don't care for the service, they'd probably like seeing you. Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps) Now today's stupid joke.

My late friend and preaching Professor Dr. Susan Hedahl had three rules for a good sermon. She said a good sermon should be well-organized; it should be easy to understand, and it should connect scripture directly to the lives of the people you are addressing. The late Comedian George Burns also had three rules for a good sermon. He said first you need a strong beginning. And then you need a strong ending. And then you need to keep the two of them as close together as possible. I'll see what I can do.

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

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.

A reading from Isaiah, the fifth chapter.

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

For 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!

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the twenty-first chapter.

[Jesus said to the people,] "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. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

They 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." Jesus 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'? Therefore 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.

The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen

Dr. Hedahl also suggested that even though we have three readings and a Psalm every week in our lectionary, it is usually best to stick with just one text for your sermon. Today would be an exception she would allow. Because the parable in our gospel reading is clearly rooted in our first reading from Isaiah chapter five.

Today we might call the described arrangement between the vineyard owner and his tenants a “leasehold estate,” “sharecropping,” or “tenement farming.” That’s where an absentee landlord allows workers to farm his land in return for a percentage of the crops or profits or both. Such arrangements were quite common in the ancient Near East, and would have been well known by the audience of Jesus as well as Matthew’s first readers.

This is an unusual parable. First, because it appears in three of the four Gospels, as well as the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas. In fact, some say it is even referenced in the Quran. But more importantly it is rare in that nearly all scholars agree on what exactly the parable meant to Jesus’ first hearers as well as Matthew’s first readers.

And it’s essentially the same message as Isaiah Chapter five: God entrusted his beloved Israel to certain leaders. The leaders messed up. So it’s time for new leaders. And what also makes this an unusual parable is that many Christians in each generation since Matthew’s, have gotten this parable completely wrong.

Most scholars agree today that Isaiah and Jesus were both foretelling the imminent fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of its Temple. Said destruction indeed stripped authority away from Temple leaders who, according to Isaiah AND Jesus, had been acting unfaithfully. THEY had been the wicked tenants, who in the end, got only what they deserved.

Writing after the temple lay in ruins, Matthew's author altered the story slightly for his own time. Unlike the earlier Gospel of Mark, Matthew added Pharisees as co-conspirators with the priests and scribes in the story. Truth is, that would have been unlikely coming from the mouth of Jesus.

Scribes and priests were of the upper-class Sadducees sect. In Jesus' day they wanted little to do with Pharisees. The Pharisees were a grassroots populist movement—a religious “Tea Party” of sorts—who didn't much care for the Temple establishment either. But they had no real authority of their own until after the temple was destroyed, when Judaism became a religion based in synagogues, rather than a central temple.

That was indeed the case by Matthew's time, and in fact, it still is today. As I have mentioned before, Matthew's first readers likely had a bone to pick with Pharisees. As synagogue leaders, they were probably responsible for the schism that tossed Matthew's group of Jewish Christians out, dividing neighborhoods, friends and even families.

By aligning the Pharisees with the Temple Priests, Matthew made it clear that Pharisees were NOT the new, better tenants referred to in the parable. At least SOME of them had proven to be wicked tenants too. So the Parable of the Wicked Tenants was really a very simple, straightforward lesson in both Isaiah and Jesus' day, that also adapted well to Matthew's time. It was told against specific leaders whose leadership had failed. It was never meant to be a parable against all Jews, which unfortunately it later became for far too many Christians.

And that has never made any sense to me, because probably all of the earliest followers of Jesus were Jews, as were Matthew's first readers. Despite the way Matthew tells it, according to Luke, Jesus and at least SOME of the Pharisees were not only NOT enemies. They actually got along pretty well. Why not? Both were Jews and temple outsiders who shared many of the same beliefs. Luke says Pharisees had Jesus over for

dinner now and then, and even warned him that Herod was out to get him. Wicked tenants wouldn't do that.

In the assigned second reading from Philippians that we didn't read, the Apostle Paul, widely credited with founding Christianity as we know it, was himself an observant Jew and a Pharisee. So it's hard to figure how so many folks in church history have mistakenly understood Jesus' wicked tenants to be not just a few corrupt religious leaders, but Jews in general.

So this became perhaps the best-known text in support of Christian anti-Semitism, even though that clearly was never the intention of Jesus OR Matthew. A Lutheran Pastor's Blog I sometimes read last week indicated most preachers planned to skip over the gospel reading today. It's just a little too uncomfortable. But because it is so uncomfortable, I think we shouldn't dare skip over it.

You may not know the words "supersessionism," or "replacement theology" but you certainly know the concept. It's the idea that Christians somehow replaced Jews as God's people. The thinking was that since most Jews did not accept Jesus as their Messiah, they ALL became "Wicked Tenants" and God's worst enemies. "Christ killers," as far too many Church leaders have put it over the centuries.

Sadly the notion that, "WE are now God's chosen and YOU aren't" is one that has caused more suffering in human history than perhaps any other. We Christians should certainly know better.

It was that same sort of religious "us-vs-them" bigotry that claimed the lives of Peter, Paul, Stephen, Justin the Martyr and hundreds of other early Christians.

It's a flawed way of thinking that historically has set Catholics against Protestants and vice versa; Sunni against Shi'a, and vice versa; and more recently minority fringe Muslim radicals against Christians and Jews alike. We've ALL suffered from it at times, but no group in human

history has suffered more from religious bigotry and persecution than Jews. And unfortunately, much of their suffering has come at the hands of self-described Christians.

In the fourth century, Emperor Constantine made it a capital offense for a Jew to marry a Christian. He thought Jews just weren't good enough. Also in the fourth century, The Bishop of Milan personally set fire to a synagogue and called it an "act pleasing to God."

St. Augustine in the fifth century wrote that the "true image of a Jew was that of Judas Iscariot" adding that Jews will forever be held accountable for the death of Jesus. (Which makes NO sense. MY Bible makes it clear Roman soldiers killed him.) Emperor Justinian made it illegal for Jews to build synagogues or read the Bible in Hebrew. Jews were declared outlaws intended by God to be slaves when they were summarily exiled from Italy. Pope Gregory the First—the one ironically called "The Great"—ordered all Jewish books be confiscated and burned in England, France, Portugal and Spain.

Twelve thousand Jews were slaughtered in the Rhine Valley in the first of the so-called "Holy" Crusades. And that was just a warm-up for thousands of "Christian Soldiers" who would go marching onward as to war to slaughter more than a million Muslims and Jews in the Holy Land. In twelfth century England, the Crown seized all Jewish-owned property and burned most Jewish homes.

When Columbus sailed the Ocean Blue in fourteen-hundred-and-ninety-two, his patrons and benefactors in Spain ordered all Jews be baptized, deported or killed, as part of the Inquisition. 300,000 refugees who escaped were ironically granted safe haven in Turkey, by sympathetic Muslims. Most weren't so lucky.

And I would like to think our Lutheran hands are clean, but not so much. Martin Luther wrote that Jewish synagogues should be set on fire and Jewish homes destroyed. He said their books should be burned and their

rabbis forbidden to teach. In the 19th century, Pope Pius the 9th ordered all Jews into ghettos in Rome. Nearly a hundred thousand died of exposure and starvation when ordered out of Russian border towns in 1915.

Nazis held Jews responsible for the surrender and harsh economic difficulties that followed World War I, and I needn't remind you of the effect THAT religious bigotry had on six million European Jews in the 30's and 40's.

Sadly it wasn't until after the holocaust that the concept of Christian supersessionism was officially rejected, at first by Lutheran and Reformed Churches (Thanks be to God.) The Catholic Church finally came on board in 1969, thanks to the efforts of Pope John XXIII at Vatican Two.

Most leaders of Mainline Protestant Churches today refute the centuries-old Christian doctrine of supersessionism, yet it persists in the minds and sermons of many so-called Evangelicals.

This despite the fact that Jews have always had a covenantal relationship with the same God we do, and that their covenants are never negated or rejected by God in the Bible--Old Testament or New. Jews ARE still God's people. Just like we are.

In fact, warts and all, we are ALL God's people. Called to live together in peace despite our differences, regardless of whether those differences are of opinion, so-called lifestyles, politics, the weather, or religion.

I used to hate the fact that when these readings come up every few years in the lectionary it is always during or near a very special time in the Jewish calendar. Yom Kippur ended the yom'im nora'im, or "high holy days" just a few days ago and we are now in the middle of Sukkot, the celebratory harvest festival that also recalls God's love and protection

for God's Chosen in the wilderness. Reading Matthew 21 at this time always made me feel kind of like a wicked tenant.

But over the years I have realized that we all have been guilty of the sin of the wicked tenants. Every time we welcome those who look, think, act, speak and worship the way we do, considering them part of "US." And rejecting those who are different or "other" or somehow just don't measure up; calling those folks, "THEM."

Amen.
