

There's an old saying, often attributed to Winston Churchill, but actually far older than him. It goes, "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." Have you ever heard that expression before, or some variation of it?

Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it. Those who do not learn from history will end up repeating history. Those who do not learn from their mistakes will repeat their mistakes.

Which is easier said than done. Sinful human beings, by and large, have a very difficult time learning from our mistakes. We're great at convincing ourselves that we've learned from them. That we've grown and matured and that we're better than the person we were last week or last month or last year. When in reality, we don't remember the past. And very often we are doomed to repeat it.

This was something that Jesus was trying to teach the chief priests and scribes in our Gospel lesson today. This is Luke chapter 20. And like the Lenten season of the church year that we're now in, this takes place in the final days leading up to Jesus' crucifixion.

And the war of words between the Jewish leaders and Jesus is really becoming quite heated. In fact, it's soon going to become far more than a war of words. They are already looking for ways to have Jesus arrested and executed.

And Jesus has really reached a point where he's just not pulling any punches anymore. Not that he really ever was. But this particular parable is really, really blunt. At least, it was to Jesus' hearers. To us, it's probably a little more obscure. So let's unpack it a little.

There's a man who plants a vineyard. Now, starting a vineyard from scratch is a time consuming, expensive proposition. It's an investment. Like any farm or business is.

He gets it all finished – the vineyard is running smoothly – and he decides he wants to take a trip to a distant country. So he rents the vineyard out to tenants. The tenants will continue to maintain the vines and harvest the grapes and make the wine.

But when it comes time to sell it, the tenants will turn over a portion of their harvest to the owner as rent. And everybody will be happy. Because the tenants will have made money on a farm they didn't have to pay to start from scratch. And the owner will have made a return on his investment without having to operate the vineyard himself. This was a very normal business arrangement. One that happened all over the ancient world.

Except that the tenants get greedy. They decide that since the owner is away, they don't have to pay their rent. They can pretend like the vineyard belongs to them. And that they don't owe the owner anything. Because, in their minds, there is no owner. They're in charge.

The owner is understandably upset about his delinquent tenants. So he sends one of his servants to collect the rent. But the tenants beat him and send him away with nothing. It's an outrageous thing to do. Completely illegal and immoral.

But the owner is patient. He sends another servant. And the tenants do the same thing. Still the owner is patient. He sends another servant. And the tenants do the same thing again.

But the owner is still patient. He still thinks, "If I can just send someone that the tenants will listen to, will respect, then I won't have to kick them out of my vineyard. This relationship can still be salvaged." So he sends his own beloved son.

But the tenants have a truly evil thought. It was common law at that time that if a landlord died without an heir to inherit his property, that land would be given to the tenants already working it. And so they think, "If we kill his son, his only heir, that puts us in line to inherit the vineyard when he dies."

It's an insane notion. Do they really believe they'll still be the tenants after they kill the owner's son? Well, actually, they do. They have spent so long pretending like there isn't an owner to this vineyard, that they have convinced themselves that he doesn't exist. That he is never going to show up and kick them out of the vineyard. Which is exactly what he does when they kill his son.

Alright, so... it's quite the soap opera. But what does it all mean? For us, it's little more than a tragic business transaction gone wrong. But for the chief priests and scribes hearing this parable, it meant far, far more.

Because, you see, this isn't the first time in God's Word that they've heard about vineyards and wicked tenants and abused servants. This is actually a parable that's been repeated many times throughout scripture. From Joshua to Samuel to Isaiah to Jeremiah to Amos. Over and over again, this parable is told and retold.

And every time, the vineyard represents Israel. The wicked tenants are the corrupt civil and religious leaders of the day. And the abused servants are the prophets that God sends to call them to repentance.

The only difference in this version of the parable is that last messenger: the owner's son. Jesus. Who has, for the last three years, been declaring himself the Son of God. And who the current religious leaders are in the very midst of plotting to murder. Just like in the parable.

And they are furious. They are furious because Jesus is lumping them in with the same men whom God has condemned time and time again. They are furious because Jesus is lumping them in with the same corrupt criminals who led Israel into exile. They are furious because Jesus is saying that they have not remembered the past. And they are now repeating it.

Repeating it to their destruction. Because as much as they may have convinced themselves that they are in charge and that God won't punish them if they murder an innocent man – let alone God's beloved Son – God is still there. Still waiting for them to listen. Still waiting for them to repent. Just as he has through dozens of prophets over hundreds of years.

For the chief priests and scribes it was, for the most part, too late. Jesus was not going to be anything but a stone that they rejected, which God would make the cornerstone. The cornerstone of something new. Something that they would either go under and be crushed or go over and cause them to stumble. But something that they would never choose to be a part of.

For us, the situation is different. For us, that new thing that God is doing waits on our altar. A new covenant in His Blood. It waits in our Baptismal font. A washing of rebirth. It springs forth in this very sanctuary. Bringing water to the wilderness and new life to his chosen people.

His chosen tenants. Chosen after the first tenants rejected him. Chosen not because we were circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin. Chosen not because of anything we have or haven't done.

But instead, chosen because Christ Jesus made us his own. Because we were called by faith in Christ Jesus and know the power of his resurrection. The vineyard has been given to others. The vineyard has been given to us. We are blessed to be chosen by God, and all other earthly righteousness or possessions fall away compared to knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

And yet, Jesus' warning to the Pharisees still rings true for us. This vineyard is not our own. This church, this kingdom of God, this mission we have to make disciples of all nations is not our own. These lives we live and all the blessings within them are not our own. It's an easy thing to say, but it's a hard lesson to remember.

And many have come before us claiming to have learned it. Claiming to have learned from the past. Learned from the Israelites. Learned from the prophets. Learned from the Pharisees.

If there is one thing that God's Word teaches about remembering the past, it's that I am doomed to repeat it. You are doomed to repeat it. We are all doomed to repeat it.

But that is the new thing that God has done. That is the cornerstone he has laid. He has sent his Son to people who don't remember the past. To die for people who don't remember the past. In order that one day we might be freed from repeating it.

In order that one day, the owner might return to his vineyard. And give his vineyard to us, his tenants. Not because we killed his son and gave him no choice. But because his son bought the vineyard for us with his own blood. That we might spend all eternity enjoying the harvest of our Lord. Amen.