

October 8, 2017 – Isaiah 5:1-7 & Matthew 21:33-46

What is the Kingdom of God? That's a big question. And it has an equally big answer. Because, in a sense, everything is the Kingdom of God. It all belongs to Him. Every stone and drop of water. Every plant and animal. The air we breath and the lungs that breath it. Everything is God's domain. It is all the Kingdom of God.

And yet, we don't usually use that term when describing creation in general. We use it to refer to God's spiritual kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew more often describes it. What is that Kingdom?

Well, there's lots of ways to describe it. But maybe the best way to think about the Kingdom of God, is to simply think of it as a synonym for the Church. Not a church. The Church. The Kingdom of God is the one holy, apostolic, universal Church on earth. Of which every Christian is a member.

And, if it's doing its job, the Kingdom of God is also a church. A particular congregation, like ours. It doesn't necessarily have to be. But whenever everything is working as it should, the two overlap. A church should be filled with the Church.

But sometimes it isn't. And our lessons from Isaiah and Matthew highlight two times in the history of God's people when a church ceased to be the Church. And from their failures, we can learn a lot about what it means for our church to be the Church. About what it means for our church to be the Kingdom of God.

We begin with our lesson from Isaiah. Which Isaiah tells us at the very beginning is God's love song to his own people, through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah. Who, as a prophet of Israel, also loves God's people.

God says that he built a vineyard on a fertile hill. It was an ideal location. The type of place where grapes should thrive. But God didn't stop there. He made it even better. He cleared it of stones. He planted the very best varieties of grapes. He even built a watchtower in it so that there would always be someone to keep an eye on this special vineyard that he had planted.

And before even the first grapes had ripened, he built a wine vat in the midst of it. He did everything to make sure that this vineyard would produce the very best grapes. And he showed complete confidence that that's exactly what would happen. But when the grapes ripened, there was something terribly wrong. They weren't the choice vines that he had planted. They were wild grapes.

I don't know if any of you have ever seen or tasted wild grapes. They're OK if you're starving to death. But usually they're very small and they're very tart. And there's lots and lots of vines, but very few grapes on them. And if you went into a vineyard looking for big, heavy bunches of sweet, juicy grapes, and what you found instead were wild grapes, you'd be thoroughly disappointed.

God had done everything for Israel. He had found a fertile land in Canaan for them. He had planted them there through the leadership of Moses and Joshua. He had cleared it of every obstacle. He had placed judges and kings and prophets to watch over them. What more was there that he could have done for them? And yet they had grown into wild grapes.

They had grown into a people without justice or righteousness. A people of violence and bloodshed. A people where the poor were left to cry out in suffering and corruption ruled every action. They were a people who had forgotten who they were and what the Lord had done for them.

They stopped looking at themselves as the perfect planting of the Lord, and instead looked at themselves as wild grapes. Without laws or boundaries. And pretty soon they became exactly that. When God's people forget who they are. When we look at ourselves in worldly ways, with worldly priorities, pretty soon we become exactly that. We cease to be godly and we become worldly.

And that's not what God is looking for. God planted choice vines looking for choice grapes. And when Israel failed to give him those choice grapes, there was no point in keeping the vines around anymore. You might as well tear it all down. Or, in Israel's case, God might as well send his people into exile.

The same is true of our Gospel lesson. Except that here, the target of Jesus' criticism has changed. The parable is set up in exactly the same way. So exactly, in fact, that it's a virtual certainty that he wants us to be thinking of Isaiah's parable.

But here, the vines are fine. The grapes are fine. The vineyard is producing just what God intended. The tenants are the problem. The tenants have gotten arrogant and greedy. Like the vines in Isaiah, they've forgotten who they are and why they're there. They think that they own this vineyard. And so they keep the grapes for themselves.

The master sends servants to convince them otherwise. But they kill them, thinking that if they can ignore the master long enough, he'll just go away. He sends more. But they kill them too. He sends his own Son. But they see only an opportunity for more violence and greed.

You see, in Jewish law, if a landowner died without an heir, the tenants themselves automatically became the heirs to the land. So they kill the Son, thinking it will make them the master's heirs. Thinking, once again, that they can be free of the master once and for all.

It doesn't. Just as killing the prophets didn't stop God from sending his Word to his people. Just as killing God's own Son didn't stop God from raising him from the dead. The chief priests and pharisees thought they could put themselves in God's place. That they could lead God's people without God himself. They thought they could set themselves up as their own false gods. They were wrong.

And this temptation to ignore God's Word at all cost still remains within his people. It's been here, lurking inside us, from the moment the serpent convinced Adam and Eve that they could be like God themselves. And it is one of the many reasons why God sent his Son to us. It's the reason why so much of Jesus' message was pretty harsh. We need to be told that there is a God, and we aren't him.

And yet, there's something important to remember about both these vineyard parables. And that is that in neither case does God give-up on his vineyard.

He seems to, in the first parable. He tears down its walls. He lets it be trampled by animals and grow wild with thorns. But we know from the history of Israel that God didn't abandon his people to exile. He restored his vineyard. Rebuilt its walls. Replanted its vines. And made it fruitful once again.

Nor does God abandon his vineyard in Jesus' parable. The tenants are removed and put to death, yes. But the vineyard remains and is put in the charge of others. Who will give the master fruit in its season.

The same is true of us. God does not abandon his vineyard. He does not abandon his kingdom. He does not abandon his Church. There are times, yes, when it must be torn down and replanted. There are times, yes, when the old tenants must die and the land entrusted to new tenants. I think we've all seen or heard about churches where that had to happen.

But the truth is that those very things must happen within the hearts of every Christian before we can ever be a part of God's kingdom. Before we can be a vineyard of anything except wild grapes, we must be torn down and trampled. Before we can ever be the tenants God wants us to be, we must be killed and made into new people.

Before we, unjust, unrighteous sinners, can ever enter into God's kingdom, we must be killed and raised to new life in His Son, by the water of Holy Baptism. Through which we are buried with Christ and raised to new life. Through which we are reborn of water and the Spirit.

The bad tenants in Jesus' parable thought that if they killed the Son, they could take his place as heirs. And the ironic thing is, they were partly right. By his death, Christ has made us heirs of God's Kingdom. Not to replace him, but to stand beside him as adopted sons and daughters of God.

A church may occasionally need to be torn down and replaced with something better. A church may occasionally need to have new leaders who will care for God's vineyard. A church is an often flawed gathering of sinful people.

But The Church must always be torn down and raised to new life. The Church must always be made of new people, born again by Word and Sacrament. The Church must always be crushed and broken to pieces on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ. So that he may rebuild us into the perfect, holy, beloved people that he has called us to be. Amen.