MATTHEW 21:33–43. (EHV)

> "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. He leased it out to some tenant farmers and went away on a journey. When the time approached to harvest the fruit, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. The tenant farmers seized his servants. They beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then the landowner sent even more servants than the first time. The tenant farmers treated them the same way. Finally, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. But when the tenant farmers saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance!' They took him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. So when the landowner comes, what will he do to those tenant farmers?" They told him, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end. Then he will lease out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him his fruit when it is due." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures [Ps. 118:22–23]:
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> > The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.
> > This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?
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> "That is why I tell you the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruit."

There is a Game Production Area not far from here where I like to go in the late summer to look for wild plums. I didn't find too many this year, but then again, I don't cultivate, water, or otherwise tend to those trees. I am free to look for fruit on them, but I don't have any right to expect fruit from them.

This morning we hear about a landowner who has a vineyard from which he has a right to expect and receive fruit.

The Jewish leaders had just been questioning Jesus about his authority, without actually wanting to know where his authority came from. They just wanted him to stop teaching and preaching, and to have the crowds stop listening to his teaching and preaching, so that they could maintain *their* authority. Jesus recognized in this a pattern stretching back all the way to Moses, and he told the Jewish leaders a parable to warn them not to continue this pattern—a warning that we also do well to heed.

The parable is about a landowner who planted a vineyard and gave it every advantage and every chance to succeed. He then leased it out to some tenant farmers and went away on a journey. When harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his share of the fruit. But one after another, the tenant farmers either beat them, killed them in "ordinary" ways (if you can call any killing ordinary), or stoned them to death.

Finally, the landowner sent his son to them, figuring they would not possibly disrespect or mistreat his son. But the tenant farmers saw him and said, "This is the heir. If we kill him, then the landowner will have no heir and we can take for ourselves what his son would have inherited!" So they took him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

Jesus let his audience finish his parable for him. "When the landowner comes, what will he do to those tenant farmers?" he asked them.

And his audience correctly answered, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end. Then he will lease out the vineyard to other tenants who will actually give him his share of the fruit when it is time.”

And Jesus essentially said, “Bingo, and that is exactly what will happen to you.”

What is he talking about?

Jesus is essentially describing the history of his people, the Israelites, with the prophets he sent to them. I mentioned that we could go all the way back to Moses, but we could perhaps go farther. Joseph prophesied to his brothers—granted, he doesn’t seem to have done it with the most humble attitude, but it is undeniable that he had the gift of prophecy from God—and how did they repay him? They planned to kill him, but one of his brothers persuaded the others to strip him and throw him into a cistern instead, and then they sold him as a slave to traders passing by.

Then we have Moses. In response to his prophecies, the people at various times cursed him; grumbled, complained, and spoke against him; and were once nearly ready to stone him to death. King Saul repeatedly tried to kill David, whom the Lord had anointed to be his successor, and David’s own son Absalom led a rebellion against him. When an anonymous prophet prophesied against King Jeroboam’s idolatry, Jeroboam tried to have him arrested, but was prevented by God. King Ahab called the prophet Elijah the troubler of Israel. After Elijah demonstrated in his presence that the Lord was the one true God, not Baal, the king related what had happened to his wife, Queen Jezebel, and the queen threatened to kill him. And Elijah says that other prophets were put to death during his lifetime. The most prominent prophet of the Old Testament after Moses, Isaiah, was sawed in two. Jeremiah was beaten, put in the stocks, threatened with death, and imprisoned. It appears that two prophets named Zechariah were put to death in the temple, one of them by being stoned.

God had all these prophets prophesy to his people to call them to repent, to receive his forgiveness and peace, and to live lives in harmony with his forgiveness and peace. His prophets preached the gospel to them, so he had a right to see the fruits of the gospel. But the last chapter of 2 Chronicles says that the Israelites kept mocking the messengers of God and scoffing at his prophets.

So finally God sent them the ultimate prophet, his Son. “Surely they will not disrespect my Son,” he thought. “Surely they will not mistreat their own Messiah, promised to them from the beginning.” But ironically, as Jesus is telling the Jewish leaders about how the landowner’s son in the parable was treated, it is Holy Week, and in just a few days the Jewish leaders would do exactly what the tenant farmers did in this parable. They would take him, throw him out of the city, and put him to death on a cross.

And so God would also do to them what the landowner did to the tenant farmers in this parable. He would bring those wretches to a wretched end, and he would give his word to others who would give him the fruit that was his due.

And that is why we’re here today. Jesus is basically telling the story of how the gospel has come to prevail not among the Jews, but among the Gentiles. But lest we simply say to the Jews, “Well, that’s too bad, isn’t it? You finally got what you deserved,” lest we simply cheer and

pat ourselves on the back and say, "Aren't we fortunate? What good boys and girls *we* are!"—we do well to note the principle of what Jesus is teaching.

The principle is that when God graciously sends his word to any people, he is extremely patient with them, sending them servant after servant, minister after minister. And of course when he sends his word to people now, the heart of that word is that he has already sent them his Son to bear their sin and its guilt and punishment. But his patience does have an end. If he continues not to see the fruit that his gospel always bears when it is actually listened to, if he continues to see his Son rejected, then he eventually says, "Fine, then you will get what you deserve, and I will take my kingdom of grace away from you and give it to people who will actually listen to his word and produce its fruit." Just because the gospel now prevails among the gentiles doesn't mean that it has to prevail among *us* gentiles.

Martin Luther once wrote an open letter *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*. In that letter he made a keen observation: "Germany, I am sure, has never before heard so much of God's word as it is hearing today; certainly we read nothing of it in history. If we let it just slip by without thanks and honor, I fear we shall suffer a still more dreadful darkness and plague. Beloved Germans, buy while the fair is close at hand! Gather while the sun is shining and while there is good weather! Make use of God's grace and word while it is here! For you should know this: God's word and grace is a passing downpour, which does not return to where it has already been. It has been with the Jews; but what's lost is lost, and they now have nothing. Paul brought it to Greece; what's lost is lost, and they now have the [Muslim] Turks. Rome and Latin-speaking regions have also had it; what's lost is lost, and they now have the pope. And you Germans dare not think that you will have it forever, for the ingratitude and disdain will not let it remain. Therefore take hold and hang on tightly, while you are able to grab and to hold. Lazy hands are bound to have a hard year" (see *Luther's Works* 45:352–53).

And guess what? If you go to almost any of the beautiful Christian and Lutheran churches in Germany on Sunday morning today, you will find hardly anyone there. And in many cases those who are there would be better off not being there, because the message is next to worthless.

Don't you think that, if Luther were alive today, he could say something very similar? "The United States, I am sure, has never before had so much access to God's word as it has today." And what are we doing with it? Are we eagerly hearing and learning it? Are we bearing its fruit of teaching and believing correctly, praying regularly, witnessing when we have the opportunity, gathering together for worship as often as we can, honoring our parents, helping and befriending our neighbors in their needs, reserving for marriage his gift of physical intimacy and cherishing and being faithful to our spouse, helping our neighbors to improve and protect their property and means of income, including by working diligently and to the best of our ability at our jobs, preserving our neighbors' reputations, and doing all of this from the heart? Or is there anything in that list at which we go, "Meh"?

Look at the love and patience of the landowner. If a landowner in real life sent just one servant and he was treated this way, that would be it, wouldn't it? Maybe two servants at the most? But our God kept sending servant after servant, even when they were killed, and then he

sent his own Son, not only as a final testimony, but also to win their salvation, to win the salvation of all mankind, to give them and us someone to repent to. And he shows the same patience to us. Think of how many pastors you have had just in your lifetime. God our Savior wants no one to perish, but everyone to come to repentance and to bear the fruits of repentance that show that repentance to be genuine.

That means that, if you're hearing this message right now, it's not too late. Forgiveness and salvation are right there close at hand, full and free! The downpour of his gospel hasn't moved on from you; it's still right here. Cherish your Savior's word! Cherish your Savior's grace! As the writer to the Hebrews says, "encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'today,' so that none of you are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13). Pray earnestly that his word may remain with us and never be taken away! Pray that we may produce its fruit! For this patient, gracious landowner, who wants our fruit, will certainly hear our prayers for the sake of his Son. Amen.