

October 4, 2020 Chapel by the Sea Worship via Zoom

Cornerstone: the Church's Foundation A sermon by The Rev. Dr. Flatley

Lectionary Text: Matthew 21:33-46

This parable is the centerpiece of a series of three parables Jesus told while teaching in the temple. We'll read the third one next Sunday. Again, Jesus was addressing the chief priests and scribes. And again they answered Jesus' question and incriminated themselves. When Jesus asks them what the landowner will do to those wicked tenant farmers who have killed each servant and even the son, the Jewish leaders indict themselves. They answer that "he, the landowner, will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time". The Jewish leaders see themselves as God's servants in this parable. They think that they have done such a good job taking care of God's chosen people against the Roman Empire. They, the religious leaders, have kept the law and defended Israel's right to worship God under such oppressive imperial occupation, and all previous exiles and occupations in their history. They see themselves as God's servants negotiating with the evil empires to retrieve the vineyard for God. In the Old Testament, vineyard is usually a symbol for the nation of Israel. Jesus has based this parable on the familiar Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard from Isaiah 5:1-7. Jesus' parable is pointing them to a different outcome other than the Pharisees self-righteous interpretation. The servants in the parable are God's prophets, not the Pharisees. The prophets of old and more recently John the Baptizer were sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord for when God would send the Messiah.

God sent his son to redeem all nations, to be a renewed people of God, called from all different ethnicities to be Christ's church, no hedges, fences or walls. Jesus reminds them of another familiar verse familiar from Psalm 118, one of the *Hallel* psalms of praise that was most likely sung at Passover Verse 21 "*I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes*". Then... the Jewish chief priests and Pharisees realized Jesus was talking about them!

In Matthew's gospel the beginnings of Christ's church was already taking shape with those who repented and were ready to receive the Kingdom of God. The

Jewish leadership was more self-righteous and fearful of the crowd and less interested in Matthew's higher righteousness and testament to Jesus, Son of God as fulfillment of all the law and prophets. It was easier to reject the truth and give the safe answer.

We have a church in our presbytery called Cornerstone. Today, after worship we're going to talk about the founding of this church, Chapel by the Sea in 1960. Any new start or church plant is exciting but sure to upset the status quo. So we'll be looking at our history with eye-witness accounts, testimonies, and written records, the anniversary books from the 35th anniversary and 50th anniversary. Now it's our turn to shine: the 60th anniversary. While all that inward looking is helpful as our Vital Congregations guide says, "in order to know where we are called to go, we must know where we have been" there's a bigger story here in the parable of the wicked tenants as it pertains to us and where we are in the arc of God's salvation history. We are not in first century Palestine, we are in 21st century United States. In the spirit of Matthew I point you to the higher righteousness and what Matthew calls the Kingdom of Heaven. This quote from James Baldwin helps us frame the bigger historical picture for our context as we ask ourselves if we are the wicked tenant farmers, the servants or do we think we are the landowners in Jesus' parable? Maybe there are traits of all three in us if we're honest. According to James Baldwin, writer and activist *"White people remain trapped within a history that they do not understand, one from which they need release - but they must act, must be committed. To act in response to this history, however, is terrifying. It requires engaging a complete recalibration of identity"*.

(The Christian Century, September 23, 2020 p 23). As our PCUSA season of peace reminded us peace is not passive, it is active. It's not waiting, it's doing. As we ask the questions of our chapel's history this day, let's also keep in mind our nation's history as we discern our calling and response to Christ the cornerstone of our faith.