

Nativity Lutheran Church
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
October 8, 2011

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Text: St. Matthew 21:33-46
Theme: A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

In Nomine Jesu

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The best way to listen to what I've got to share today is to think of it as – well I think the best word is a "soliloquy." That's something that goes back at least to Shakespeare. After some action or event in a play, one of the characters in the play reflected on what the event or action meant. This "soliloquy" on the text we've shared, is a gift from a seminary colleague of mine. I'm glad he chose to share it.

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No question who planted it. It's right there in the text. God has planted a vineyard. No doubt about it. And what a vineyard it is! It's the envy of all vineyards. It's well fenced in, to keep out unwanted visitors or predators. It has a custom-built wine press. This vineyard is serious about making wine!

Now, who wants to occupy this vineyard? Hmmm. Inside the fence in the wonderful vineyard or outside the fence where there's – who knows what? Let's see, where do you think we as God's baptized family would be? Insiders, of course.

Now what about this fence and watchtower? How did God construct these? Through God's law. God's law serves as our protection. What more do we need? Let the vineyard be fruitful.

But instead of making wine for God we make – sorry about this – we make "whine." When others come looking for our produce we bask in our protection. Who says we have to share? We have the law on our side and you don't. God gave it, but now it's ours!

So we throw the law – our law, we think – at those slaves God sends to us. And of course the law convicts and kills. But that is no concern of ours because we are already inside. We've been given tenancy and we aren't about to budge or listen to anyone. We, who occupy the vineyard, take that fence seriously and judge everyone who tries to enter. We reject even those who have been sent by God himself to collect the produce he expects – we do it as we throw the law at them. And the law in our hands beats them up, stones them, kills them and keeps them from collecting what the owner has planted.

Do we show remorse? No. We just sigh with relief that we are inside the fence. We figure that since God rented this land to us we have squatters rights.

The problem with tenancy is that it is hard to get us to budge once we take possession of the property. We may not own the vineyard, but we sure do act like we do. Even the owner's only son is incapable of convincing us that God wants to reap what his land is capable of producing.

Still, we can't hear God's will any more ... we're incapable of hearing the law in any way but our own ... so there will be blood. Instead of sharing the fruit in our possession we keep it to ourselves. What choice do tenants have, we think?

And once we've harmed the slaves of the owner, we tenants can't help but live a longer live of crime. It's kill or be killed. We can't afford to be evicted. We trust the fence, not the One who erected it. We even try to fortify it by formulating new doctrine. And by killing the Son we will ensure that we can occupy this land forever. The land will be ours for good.

But with all this bloodshed, God has no choice but to return to his vineyard and clean house. We've misused his land and misinterpreted his fence. We used God's fences selfishly, to protect ourselves and not the fruit of the vineyard. If God is the one who gave us that "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" maxim, then we are as good as dead for the murders already committed – for all the slaves we've killed, but especially for his Son. There will be hell to pay, and the wicked tenants will pay for it with a miserable death. We all fear this – the very fence given to protect us will now keep US from enjoying the vineyard.

Well, God does come back to his vineyard looking for his Son's body. And he finds it buried in the ground. But instead of evicting the tenants or destroying the vineyard he is more interested in the death and life of his Son. It was on a rejected rock – Golgotha – that all the wicked tenants of every generation killed God's rightful heir. We tried to throw the law at him, but Jesus defeats it through his innocent death.

So God resurrects his rejected Son, and that Son not only becomes a building block but a wrecking ball. And while we, the wicked tenants may fear that wrecking ball swinging toward us is going to crush us, it isn't. Instead of being used against us it is used for us. At first we can't see that, though.

The wrecking ball smashes the fence and tears down the tower. Through Christ's death and resurrection the law we have abused is no longer to be found in fences and towers. The law has been accomplished in this Son, so it takes on a whole new life. This rejected stone opens for us a whole new world. A world built on trusting the owner and not the fence. And God sees to it that Jesus became our protection and gives us freedom to live unfettered in God's vineyard.

So, guess what? No surprise – all this changes us. We no longer need to be squatters. We no longer need to fear eviction. With no fences to maintain or fortify we can focus on the fruit of the vineyard. Our baptism reminds us that the Holy Spirit is at work in us. Now we operate out of a law written on our hearts by God's love for us. In a complete role reversal, God becomes a tenant in us and God isn't budging.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit we are being moved to produce wonderful fruit. And we produce a wine with a full, rich bouquet. Guided by the Spirit we become all about the wine – and the bread – and less about the "whine."

But of course it's actually Christ's body and blood that we are about, as it is given for us, shed for us, and becomes our rock of strength.

Just think of the possibilities! Internally fortified, we are secure to give the produce away to all whom the owner asks us to. To fellow slaves, but no longer slaves, now siblings. To neighbors near and far. To wine critics and teetotalers. There's no longer any condemnation to face.

We become bold to take risks for those who are at risk. We reach out to those who still experience the confinement of fences and walls. We use the rock of Christ to tear down those walls and break the chains that bind the hopeless and despairing. Prisons, hospitals, homeless shelters, the streets – they're all in need of the body and blood of Christ.

We share fruit, we share resources, we share the law of God's love – we share the Gospel. We do it as we welcome these others into God's vineyard. God's kingdom – not ours.

In the Name of Jesus.

AMEN!

Soli Deo Gloria