

*“Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.” Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

What is your Thanksgiving going to be like this year? Quebec’s premier is urging people to ‘cancel’ Thanksgiving. It sounded as if Prime Minister Trudeau was saying the same thing as he addressed the nation recently. We all know that this is related to COVID-19, and the concern that larger gatherings in smaller spaces have the potential to spread infection. I don’t deny that things have to be different. People are less likely to travel to be with family and friends. If we do gather, we will do it with our smaller family or with a cohort that we’ve already established. But cancel Thanksgiving? If you mean we cancel the worldly idea of a special day off, well that’s one thing. But thanksgiving isn’t a day. It is an attitude of the heart that responds to the love, mercy and grace that our God has bestowed upon us as His people. As the psalmist said: *“Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!”* (Psalm 118:1, ESV)

We don’t cancel thanksgiving; we live in it. We are here today by the grace of God. It is His promise of forgiveness and life in Jesus Christ that brings us together. When we celebrate an event like a Baptism, we remember how God, in love, reaches out to even the smallest of us, to bring us the blessings of life in its fulness through Christ. When we get out of bed, and our names aren’t listed in the obituary column, we can give thanks to the Lord who gives life to our bodies. Even in the darkest moments of our lives, even in the greatest times of confusion, God reveals Himself as our Saviour and God, who gives us hope to go on and face the day. And He has done this for His people throughout the ages. As Jeremiah declares: *“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”*” (Lamentations 3:22-24, ESV)

If God has been—and is—so good to us, why do we have such a hard time being good to God? God does not bless us simply for the sake of making us comfortable. As our text today reminds us, God’s blessings have a purpose—the same purpose that a farmer has in planting a vineyard and that is that through His provision, care and grace we may bring forth fruit to His glory and our good. Well, harvest time is coming! Therefore it is good to ask ourselves: are we harvest ready? Are we bearing fruit that we gladly, freely, and joyously return to our God, mindful of how good He has been to us?

Our text today is a vivid reminder that God does expect that His grace, given so freely to us, will bring forth fruit in our lives. It is not that God comes and says, “Hey, I want to get what’s coming to me! I want to profit from you! But God does pour out His blessings upon us that we may be a blessing for others. He bestows His goodness on us, that through His goodness we may bring His hope and grace to others, too.

The goodness of God to us is revealed in many ways in this parable. Jesus describes a vineyard that is totally equipped. In fact, the landlord not only owns the vineyard; Jesus says that he planted it himself. It was well protected, complete with a wall and watchtower and with the winepress that would allow for convenient productivity. This vineyard is a source of pride for its owner and a place in which workers would enjoy their labour. As God says to Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson today: *“What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?”* (Isaiah 5:4, ESV)

This wonderful vineyard is then given to tenants who are to use it to best advantage. A standard arrangement would be that the

tenants, rather than being hired hands, were allowed to benefit from the vineyard itself. As their rent, they were to give a portion of the fruit to the landowner. However, the profits earned belonged to them. Their careful use of the landowner's resources held immense promise for them. It was a win-win situation for the landowner and for the tenants.

Well, harvest time arrived, and the landowner sent his servants to collect the rent. But the tenants were unwilling to give the owner what was due to him. In fact, they acted in the most atrocious fashion. They beat one servant, killed another and stoned another like a criminal. Yet even here we see the overwhelming goodness of the landlord. He shows a patience that is without parallel in our world. He sends other servants, hoping to get through to the tenants, and yet they treat these servants the same way. Finally, giving the tenants one last chance, he decides to send his son. But the foolish tenants, thinking that they will be able to claim the vineyard as their own, murder the son. They abuse everything the landowner has done for them. It is only right that there is the judgment that comes when the landowner acts, as our text says: ***“He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”***

Jesus spoke these words in a parable. But a parable is more than just a story. It is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus is reminding God's chosen people how they had killed His servants, the prophets. Even now, the Pharisees are plotting to get rid of Jesus. After Jesus tells this parable, Matthew notes: ***“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.”*** (Matthew 21:45, ESV) But isn't he also talking about us? I know that we may not be as bad as the Pharisees, but do we always bring forth the fruit that God has every right to expect from us? In our sermon hymn today, we prayed, ***“Grant us hearts, dear Lord, to give You gladly, freely, of Your own.”*** (LSB 851, st. 2) But do we do that? God blesses us richly because of His grace and love for us. He gives us everything we need to support this body and life. He has brought us together in His vineyard, in His church, to work together for our good and for the joy we bring to one another as brothers and sisters and Christ. God the Holy Spirit comes to us and equips us with all that is necessary for us to bear fruits of faith and righteousness in our lives. He empowers us that we may work to share the hope and life we have in Christ with others, so that there will be a glorious harvest on judgment day. But do we make the best use of God's goodness, and return that goodness as fruits of righteousness?

When we look at God's Word, we realize that we have not been the people we should be. We, too, are sinners, who have squandered God's grace to us. We have turned from God and thought only of ourselves. We have not used His Word and Sacraments as we should. We don't live by that Word, as it leads us to do those things that are right, and keeps us from those things that are harmful to us. We don't turn to His wonderful Word for the answers to all of life's needs. We do not remember the life that God gives us in our Baptism. We come to the Lord's table in Holy Communion where we are forgiven and strengthened—but then do not live in that forgiveness and newness of life. We squander God's gifts—or perhaps we even forget the God who gives us all things in the first place. And we deserve the punishment that the wicked tenants received.

But our patient, loving God is not finished with us. He desires not our punishment, but our salvation. And so He gives us His Son—the last sign of His patience, but also the only One who can bring us the forgiveness and life God wants us to have. Like the son in the parable, the Son of God will be killed by jealous, foolish people. But His death is not senseless. It is atonement. It is the way that God reveals the fulness of His love for all people. On the cross, Christ takes the place of God's “tenants”, including sinners like you and me. He suffers so that He can bring us forgiveness, life and redemption. He calls us to leave our sinful ways and to trust in Him. He calls us to the new life we can have through His resurrection. He calls us to be fruitful people—people who have been blessed not only with the things of this world, but also with the blessings of heaven itself. Our lives look at all God has done, is doing and will do for us. We look at the forgiveness and life we have in Christ. We rejoice in the hope that is ours for eternity. And we live to show the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light.

In our epistle lesson, we see Paul admit that his life was once like those of the wicked tenants. Now, redeemed through the dying and rising Saviour he says: ***“one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 3:13–14, ESV) That is fruitful living. As we make use of God's goodness and give Him His ‘rent’ through faith and service, we show ourselves to be ready, especially as the final harvest draws ever nearer. God keep us ready for that day! Amen.