



20 PENTECOST

A05 (PROPER 22)

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 October 2005

Pastor Kevin Maly

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 80

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Whoever dies with the most—fill in the blank—wins. You know how it goes: *whoever dies with the most stuff, the most toys, wins. Whoever dies with the most money wins.* If you're in the world of academics, it might be *whoever dies with the most publications wins.* For other people it's *whoever dies with the most property or real estate or cars—wins.* Then there's *Whoever dies with the most power wins.* And if you were to take a tour of my clothes closet, you'd realize that for me it's, *whoever dies with the most pairs of shoes wins.*

Of course there's nothing intrinsically wrong with *stuff, toys, real-estate,* or even *power*—we need powerful teachers, researchers, writers, and nurses. Nothing wrong either with *publications, cars, money,* or even my *shoes.* The problem lies, rather, with a couple of four-letter words: *most* and *wins.* Underlying both of them is what Martin Luther called our *turned-in-on-selfness.* If I am to have or to be the *most* anything, it means I alone must be number one, and everyone else must be something less—preferably much less so as to eliminate or at least limit anyone coming close to my *mostness.* And if I am to *win,* everyone else must lose, and of course I would prefer my winning be by a comfortably gigantic margin. It's the way we are, and if we say it's not so—we haven't spent enough honest time with ourselves. And that's where Isaiah and the other prophets come in.

The prophets of the Bible weren't people who told what the future held, so much as they were people who held a mirror up to those who thought they must be winners at all costs; the prophets held up a mirror to those who wanted to be the most and the highest, and to hell with everyone else, thank you very much. The prophets hold up a mirror to human kind and say, "Your ways are causing great harm to everyone and everything around you, yourselves included. The poor get poorer everyday. Your dreams of empire and the crushing taxes that are a result put at risk those who are already unspeakably vulnerable. You have made for yourselves a land where the very few live the high-life, and where those upon the heights unheedingly and unceasingly cast their garbage upon the earth and people beneath them." "Your women," says Isaiah, "are haughty, mincing, overfed, and drunk on wine in the middle of the day. And your men are no better; those who rule pretend to be leaders but act more like spoiled, peevish, petulant, adolescent boys; everyone of them can be bought with a bribe; no merchant is honest; and the religious leaders are arrogant and self-righteous, pandering to the powerful and seeking to afflict the common people with fear, guilt, and shame."

"This is not what God intended when God gave you every good thing," say the prophets. "The harvest of the vineyard, the harvest that God expects of you as God's people is nothing more nor less than justice, mercy, kindness, and peace. This means that there is to be no hoarding of food, goods, or land. This means that people must not be crushed beneath daily-increasing debt at impossibly high interest rates," say the

prophets. “This means that people are to provide for any and all who were poor. This means that foreigners in the land—yes, even undocumented foreigners—are to be treated as honored guests; that animals are to be treated humanely; that the land is to be cared for and conserved (what a concept).”

“What’s more,” say the prophets, “the harvest God expects includes walking humbly before God. Not putting your self above others or the creation, you are to live as down-to-earth creatures. Not trying to tell God how to be God, you are to refrain from putting yourself upon the judgment seat that belongs to God alone.”

These prophets with their painfully honest words are the slave messengers of Jesus’ parable, the ones sent by the Landowner in an attempt to eke out a harvest of justice, mercy, peace, and humility before God and humanity. These emissaries of the landowner, however, prove to be about as popular as seventy-times-seven plagues, and they must be gotten rid of as quickly and efficiently as possible!

And so in a last ditch effort the landowner sends—the Son. The Son, however, fares no better than the other emissaries. He is seized, made an outcast, and killed. So what should the landowner do to those who kill the Son? “Well, of course,” reply the grim-faced religious leaders, “the landowner should put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him good produce.”

Jesus then turns enigmatic with the Chief Priests, the Scribes, and the Pharisees and starts talking about a stone, a stone that will trip up the religious, that will fall upon the power elite, but a stone that will be for others a cornerstone. The religious leaders *hear* in all of this a threat to themselves and their power. They *hear* Jesus threatening the wrath of God upon *them*. They *hear* Jesus threatening *them* with the death penalty that they have unwittingly just pronounced.

But God, always the sneaky one, has a far different plan—a plan that one might say is much more . . . lethal. God is *not* going to do what the religious leaders think God is going to do. They expect a god of vengeance and wrath, a god who will send a miserable death upon those who reject the prophets and the Son. The God of the Surprise Ending, however, is going to treat the religious leaders in the very same way that God treats prostitutes, traitorous tax-collectors, the diseased, and the untouchable: God is going to pronounce a sentence of . . . mercy and peace, love and forgiveness, and life that endures rather than an everlasting death penalty. “Do your worst to me,” says God, “but I will not lift up my hand against you. I would rather suffer the very worst death the world has to offer than be known as anything other than the God of infinite love and forgiveness.”

“But how can *that* be,” snidely sneer the religious leaders. “Isn’t God supposed to be the most powerful, the most holy, the most righteous? And isn’t God supposed to win, not suffer and—scandal of scandals—die? What have we been striving after all this time? We wanna a god of most-ness and winning. We wanna be *like* a god of most-ness and winning. A God who wills to suffer, to be weak, to hang out with the world’s losers is not playing by our rules. Get real; who but losers would want to be like a God who serves the poor, who loves those whom normal people find disgusting, a God who, when attacked, won’t fight back with weapons of mass destruction? *That* kind of a God IS a stumbling stone—and if that is going to be the foundation stone of the realm of God—well *those* people can just have it. Next thing you know *those people* will be saying heaven is where absolutely everyone gets to sit down and feast with God, where there are neither most nor least, neither winners nor losers. If that’s God’s heavenly garden who wants it!” rage the religious. “We’d rather die than associate with some damn fool of a loser God who loves all people equally.”

“Hmm,” says Jesus. “Sounds like for you God’s heavenly garden is going to be just hell.”