



## 27<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

(Proper 22)

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

6 October 2002

We pretty much know how this parable works, but let's review it anyway. There was a landowner—God obviously—and the landowner plants a vineyard and lends it out to some tenant farmers. The landowner sends one messenger after another to collect the produce of the vineyard—but the people have nothing to return to the landowner and so they stone the preacher prophets—one after another. Finally the landowner sends the son—the truly authoritative one. The landowner is sure that the tenants will listen to the son. But no—they seize the son and kill him too.

Now—what do we suppose the landowner should do? We all know the answer. The landowner will throw the sinful tenants out on their ears and lease the vineyard to others. Isn't that right?

What happens though if we're told, along with the Pharisees, that we're wrong—way, way, way wrong? What happens if the answer is—“The landowner, when he comes is going to forgive the tenants all that they have done”? Well, that *is* the answer, and the Pharisees and any who answer alongside of them haven't been listening much to Jesus. Or then again, maybe they have—but they don't think very much of the answer. Sensible people do not like the prospect of the landowner forgiving the lazy, wicked, sinful tenants who will not produce good fruit. But the landowner *does* forgive them—for beating one slave, killing another and stoning another. Yes, and the landowner forgives them for doing likewise to all the rest of the messengers who came to collect. To top it all off, when the owner of the vineyard finally does come, what he's going to do is forgive—*yes, forgive*, even the evil ones who killed his son. And these tenants will inherit the kingdom—all they need do is trust that they are forgiven and accepted—and—*shudder*—loved without conditions.

Haven't you heard the scripture? The stone that the builders rejected has become their very cornerstone—this is the Lord's doing and it is, in the Greek of Matthew, *thaumasté—shocking, astonishing, unacceptable* in our eyes. The people who sinned *will, in fact*, receive the son's inheritance—just for holding open their hands. It's the scandal of grace—it's the same scandal that makes us object when we hear that the lazy laborer of one, easy hour will receive as much as the laborers who were there from the very first, who slaved twelve, long, dusty, hot hours in the fields.

No matter how much we give lip service to the notion of free grace and Christ's willfully dying love, *we do not like it – especially if we suspect that the lowlife neighbor is going to get off, scot free*. The whole thing is just too promiscuous. It lets rotten tenants, crooked tax collectors, and common tarts into the kingdom ahead of us who really try do things properly and in good order. We do not like it when some shabby Gospel exaltation of dumb trust cancels out our worthy works.

We *will* continue to sing *Amazing Grace* in church, but we are going to be damn careful when it comes to explaining to the riffraff what it actually means. We will assure them, of course, that God loves them and forgives them, but we will make it quite clear that *we* expect *them* to clean up their act before we make any moves to clasp them seriously to our hearts. We do not want whores, chiselers, practising gays, and convicted felons thinking they can just barge in here and fraternize

with us, our children, and our grandchildren. Above all, we certainly don't want any of them standing up there in the pulpit and telling us that God forgives such effrontery. Do too much of that and the church is just going to die.

We, the respectable Pharisees, the twelve-hour all day workers, are tired of being trampled on by the Feet Beautiful upon the Mountains. We are resentful at being the butts of some divine joke of grace that says nothing else matters except plain, old, yes-Jesus trust. And we are going to institutionalize our righteous resentment with a constitutional amendment, or a referendum, or *something* that says the church is not going to be for sinners and gainsayers. We do believe—but what we believe in is largely an ethico-religious construct of our own devising, a system that we desperately hope will make the world safe for democracy, and for the thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent, mildly-sinning sinners like ourselves.

The Gospel is a stumbling block, the rejected cornerstone over which we trip. We charge into it with our merit-based ways of being but it won't budge—it just stands there—firmly unmoving until it breaks our every notion that we must justify our existence—or more importantly, that our neighbors must justify their existence—with meritorious work and conduct. The stumbling block, the scandal of the Gospel, smashes to bits our folly that will not see that God judges nothing else—not goodness, not badness, not anything—except our acceptance of God's acceptance of the world by dumb trust alone. And so the self-justifying in the world—including an alarmingly high number of Christians who think that being well behaved—is more important to God than trusting God's forgiveness—the self-justifying of the world see Jesus as a threat.

The troops are not amused by the prospect of absolutely free salvation. The first instinct of the Pharisees and their friends, after they have smiled indulgently at the preacher's charmingly easygoing concept of salvation, is to nail Jesus to the wall for knocking the props out from under divine retribution for nasty deeds. We like the law and we will not have anyone messing around with it, thank you very much.

Jesus died for the sins of those who killed him—even for the sins of unbelief by which *we kill him all over again*. God, however, has stacked the deck. It seems that our neighbor is going to be forgiven whether we like it or not. It may even be the case that we're going to be forgiven. All you or anybody else really needs to do is approach Christ, your only fruits being the wide-open hands of a beggar. And we are beggars all.