

“Hope for a Broken World”
Matthew 21:33-46
September 27, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

We are beginning a new sermon series today on the church’s vision, mission and core values. The leadership of the church has been working for the past year on a five-year strategic plan, and as part of this we have sought the Lord’s leading for greater clarity in these major areas. Today we are going to look at our vision statement. Let me begin by defining what we mean by a vision statement, and distinguishing that from a mission statement. We understand a vision statement to be a word picture describing a desirable future that only God can accomplish. A mission statement is a concise statement of what we are going to do in partnership with God to bring about the desirable future stated in the vision. So the vision describes what we want God to do, while the mission statement is what we understand God wants us to do. I have printed on the sermon outline page of the bulletin both the vision and mission statements. We are going to look at our vision today and our mission next week.

The desirable future we believe God has for us is to be a “community of the coming kingdom, bringing hope to a broken world.” We want God to form our church into a community that looks something like heaven. Heaven is a kingdom under the reign of King Jesus. What does that reign look like? Why would people want to live in that kingdom? We want God to form us into a little slice of heaven so that the world will see that the reign of God is something very much to be desired. God’s reign leads to a place filled with grace and love, to a place where people find themselves most alive. We are to be a little outpost of the coming kingdom. As we become this kind of community and declare the good news of this kingdom, we will bring hope to a world that is broken. They will see in us and hear from us that Jesus is the way for broken lives to be mended.

As we think about this vision statement, I want us to look today at a parable Jesus spoke during the last week of his life. It contains all three of the elements in our vision statement. The parable itself is easy to grasp, even for those of us far removed from the cultural world of first century Palestine. A man has a large vineyard in a country far removed from where he lives. He makes arrangements for tenants, similar to what we would call sharecroppers, to take care of the vineyard on his behalf. They enter into a financial agreement in which the owner is to receive a certain amount of the produce of the vineyard, while the tenants are allowed to keep the rest. After a sufficient amount of time has passed, he sends servants to collect the produce he and the tenants had agreed to. The servants find that the tenants have had

something of a change of heart and don't want to give the owner what he is entitled to. So they beat one, kill another and nearly kill a third through stoning. After hearing of this, the owner sends another band of servants, only to have them treated as the first group. In a final attempt, the owner thinks that perhaps the error has been sending servants instead of someone with a little more authority. So he sends his son. Apparently, it is his only son, since the tenants think that once he is gone, no heir will remain. Though the son's stature is greater than the others, he is treated the most severely, being killed by the tenants. There will be no more messengers, because the next visit will be one which will bring them to justice by having them all executed.

The religious leaders heard this parable and knew that Jesus was telling it against them. They were the tenants who had mutinied against the owner of the vineyard, and now they were about to kill the owner's only Son. This is a parable, though, that is not only about Israel's sinful rebellion against God, but about the entire human race. Let's look at the three parts of our vision statement that we find in this parable, and do so in reverse order.

I. A Broken World

At the heart of the brokenness of this world is our rebellious attitude toward the owner. The Bible is clear throughout that the root of the human problem is not sociological, educational, political or economic. It is theological. Deep within the human psyche is a firm conviction that God is not welcome in our lives except on our terms. If he would only do what we want him to do, like a genie that we can bring out when we want him so that he can give us what we want, then we would welcome him. But the moment he shows up and makes a claim of his ownership rights, we will stop at nothing to get him out of our lives.

If this owner had stayed away and never come to claim his rights as owner, there would have been no rebellion. In the same way, our rebellion against God is not expressed until God asserts his rights as God. For example, people get angry at God when he asserts his right to define morality. When God calls certain behaviors wrong, it provokes a rebellious response, particularly among those who have been engaging in that wrong behavior. And as was the case in this parable, that anger is usually directed at the servants of the owner. Those who believe that God has authority over what two consenting adults do in their bedroom are often ridiculed in our day. The same happens when God asserts his rights as Judge. People get angry at the idea of eternal judgment in hell. Many want a god who sends no one to hell. Others rebel against God when he asserts his rights to control the circumstances of our lives. When God doesn't answer prayers for healing, for example, many will respond to him in anger and walk away from him.

If God let us do whatever we wanted to do and never judged anyone and always did exactly what we wanted him to do, there would be no rebellion against him. But in that case, God is no longer God. We are our own gods. That is ultimately what these tenants wanted. And, like these tenants, we want God to fund the whole thing. The vineyard had been paid for by the owner. Their livelihood came from his property. And then they used this against the owner. The strength that came from his resources they used to beat his servants and kill his son.

The root of the brokenness in this world is theological, but it doesn't stop with our relationship to God. A mutinous attitude toward God leads to violence against others, and the reason is the self-centered attitude. In their selfishness, these tenants were prepared to do whatever was necessary to protect and defend their claim. They were like little gods trying to assert their control over their lives, and they were not going to let anyone stop them, no matter what it took. If someone is willing to say that the purpose of God's existence is to serve me, then they will also believe that others exist to serve me as well.

So this is the brokenness of our world. We want to overthrow God's rights as God and be as god ourselves. And we don't care whose lives are hurt in the process. When Jesus states this in the form of this story, it is clear what this rebellion deserves. He asks his audience what the owner will do when he finds out what the tenants have done, and they answer without hesitation, **"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."** No one can fault God for asserting his ownership rights through judgment upon those willing to challenge him.

II. The Only Hope for a Broken World

You cannot live without hope. It is as necessary as oxygen. Is there hope for a broken world? If by nature we are all like these wicked tenants, wanting to deny God his just rights as God, then the army is marching toward us even now. It's only a matter of time before the trumpet sounds and the army of God comes to bring justice to those who have overthrown his authority and treated his Son so cruelly. It's one thing to claim for ourselves what rightly belongs to God, and another to sustain that claim when the rightful owner shows up. Have you ever been to a sporting event where there were empty seats and you decided to sit in seats that were better than yours? Since you know the seats don't rightly belong to you, you have a little fear that the rightful owner is going to show up and force you to move. It's a weak analogy because our crime is far greater than that. We have indeed laid claim to that which is not rightly ours, and the rightful owner is going to show up. What hope is there for us?

Let's look back over the story again and see if there is any reason for hope. One of the things I notice is the great patience of the owner. We see his patience in the fact that he refrained from sending in the army when the first beaten servant returned empty-handed. I think most of us would agree with Martin Luther when he said, "If I were God, and the world had treated me as it treated Him, I would kick the wretched thing to pieces." But the owner sent more servants, and even when this second group of servants were treated just as cruelly, still he did not send in the army. It's not hard to know what the tenants must have been thinking. They mistook his patience for weakness, and they were emboldened to greater cruelty when the owner took the great risk of sending his final messenger, his only son. This was the owner's last card to play, they reasoned. Once they removed the son, nothing would stand in the way of their taking possession of the vineyard for themselves.

They had miscalculated in two ways. They were mistaken about the owner's power, thinking his failure to act to enforce his legal claim meant that he never intended to act. People make the same mistake today, don't they? Peter refers to this attitude in 2 Peter 3 where he reports that scoffers will say that Jesus will never return in judgment because nothing like that has ever happened before. Peter then goes on to give another interpretation for God's long delay to send Jesus back as Judge. **"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance"** (2 Peter 3:9). Even now, the army of God is waiting to come and bring judgment. All it will take is one word from God and this army will be upon us to judge all God's enemies. But for now he is withholding the command, delaying this action out of his great patience, in order to give time for repentance.

These tenants had not only underestimated the power of the owner, but also his mercy. The tenants were like the chief priests and Pharisees who were listening to Jesus' parable, and who replied that the owner should "put those wretches to a miserable death." When the parable ends, Jesus goes on to say something astounding. Quoting a well-known verse from Psalm 118, Jesus said, **"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes."** Stone masons select by hand each stone to be put in the building. They come across one stone that none of them sees as ever being useful in the building. So they set it aside to be discarded, perhaps to be pounded into smaller rocks to be used in making a path. While they conclude that the stone will not work in their building, God draws a different conclusion. The building will not work without this stone, and he makes it the chief cornerstone. The cornerstone was the stone placed at the base of two intersecting walls, the stone holding everything together. Jesus is the chief cornerstone. Though he was killed by the tenants, God raised him up and made him central to everything.

And then, continuing with the metaphor of the rock, Jesus says that he is a rock that will bring judgment. Some will fall on him, and like a clay pot falling on a rock, the pot will be destroyed, while the rock remains unharmed. Or if the rock falls on the pot, the results would be the same. This is a statement of great mercy. Even though we have killed the son, there is still hope if we receive the Son. His word to us now isn't the word the son gave to the tenants in the parable, a command to "Pay what you owe." His word now is "Receive the payment I make on your behalf." I like the way Charles Spurgeon speaks of this. "If you reject him, he answers you with tears; if you wound him, he bleeds out cleansing; if you kill him, he dies to redeem; if you bury him, he rises again to bring resurrection. Jesus is love made manifest."

III. Our Place in the Story

The church consists of those who have received the payment Jesus makes on our behalf. We are the former mutineers who have been mercifully pardoned. We are those Jesus speaks of in verse 43 where he says, "**I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.**" So we are the community of God's coming kingdom. As such, we are to be marked by at least two qualities. First, we are to be a joyful, grateful community. The king has come to us not with judgment but with mercy. Though we deserved death, Jesus died instead. Now we live in God's vineyard with clear consciences, enjoying the many benefits given by our great God.

Secondly and paradoxically, we are to be marked by suffering and persecution. We are the servants who go to the tenants trying to live in rebellion against the owner. When we remind them that the owner has a claim upon them, they are not going to like it. But God has his people among that group, and those who belong to him will hear and repent. They will accept the Son's payment for their mutiny and join our happy community.

CONCLUSION:

We are God's invited guests to the Lord's Supper. The appropriate response is simply to receive the abundance of his feast. Remember that you've done nothing to deserve it and you can do nothing to pay for it. Even to make an attempt to do so is an insult to our host. We simply receive his great gift to us through Jesus. It is all the more remarkable that he should be this generous with former mutineers. But that is what we were. Now we are invited guests. Even better, we are family. We are the community of God's coming kingdom. May he use us to bring hope to this broken world!