

## *The 18th Sun after Pentecost, Proper 22 “Bearing Fruit for the LORD”*

*Ex 20:1-4,7-9,12-20; Phil 3:4b-14; Mt 21: 33-46, Ps 19*

God’s love and grace are good. They are boundless and eternal. Grace, like love, is unearned and undeserved. And it is good to bask in the warmth of that love....that grace. But the problem with the Reformation’s approach to “Justification by Faith through Grace, not works,” is that sometimes grace becomes so free that it becomes cheap. It has no value. Or, it’s available to anyone who wants it, whenever they want it.

This was a very real and serious concern of the great German theologian and martyr to the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Cheap grace was the principle concern of Bonhoeffer’s work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, because, yes, discipleship often does carry a cost and one of the greatest costs of discipleship is that of forgiveness. We may not like “to forgive” or even want to forgive, but that is what disciples, real disciples, are constantly challenged to do.

Today we hear the great gospel story, generally titled: “The Parable of the Wicked Tenants.” Well, guess what, this is one of those parables that should make us feel uncomfortable, because it is a judgment parable. It is a judgment parable for the Church and for all of its members.

You see, this parable is one of those parables that should make us uncomfortable because it makes us aware of the true *Cost of Discipleship*. Yes, we are saved by “grace,” not “works,” but this parable makes it clear that real discipleship must also bear “fruit.” It should bear fruits, worthy of repentance and the Kingdom of Heaven. Christian Discipleship should bear the fruits of the Kingdom that Christ inaugurated and to which we profess and proclaim.

And, these “*fruits worthy of repentance*” are: “righteousness, mercy, justice, *and.... forgiveness.*” This parable is so important that it is found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. In this parable, Jesus promises that the Vineyard will be given over to “*other tenants who will give the vineyard owner his fruits in due season.*” [21.41]

Despite the evil actions of the “Wicked Tenants,” their ultimate failing is one of pride and avarice. The tenants rejected the rightful claim that the landowner had on his portion of the produce. Instead, they seemed to foolishly think that they could keep the harvest to themselves; perhaps even coming to justify their actions of “keeping it all to themselves,” because, after all, *they had earned it.*

The problem is that the “fruits” of the kingdom—the “fruits” of righteousness, justice, mercy, and forgiveness—are meant to *share*. These are not things that we are meant to keep, these are things that are meant to give *away*.

Remember that this parable is in the midst of Jesus’ justification of his own authority. It follows Jesus’ proclamation that what matters most, is what we actually *do*. The one who does the “*Will of the Father*” [Mt 21:31] is the son who does rightly. In the parable of the Wicked Tenants, the tenants

do *not* do rightly. They do not bear the fruits of the kingdom. They do not seek mercy, forgiveness, justice, and righteousness for all. They do not *do* the Will of the Father, and so they are judged.

In this parable, it is not the people who are judged; it is only the leaders. But as Christians, we must sit up and take notice, for as Christians, we all stand to be judged, just as the vineyard tenants and Jewish leadership were judged.....for we are the inheritors of the vineyard. We are the “priesthood of all believers.” It is not merely the Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, who will stand judged by the fruits they produce for the kingdom, but all Christians.

*Grace* may be unencumbered by *merit*, but *discipleship* is not! Disciples are to be “fruit bearers,” actively *doing* the will of the father. The Cost of Discipleship is righteousness, mercy, forgiveness, and mercy for *all* people. And we should always ask ourselves, “Are those “fruits of the kingdom” only for our own use or the use of the owner?” Make no mistake about it this parable is about judgment. It challenges us to question our own fruitfulness in *doing* the “Will of the Father.”

The Challenge for us this day is to remember that Disciples are called to be “fruit-bearers.” So the question is, what fruit do we offer the owner *this* day?

***“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.” Ps 19:14***

### **What are the implications and meanings for *you* in today’s readings?**

1. Jesus challenges the Pharisees with a parable of judgment. Why do you think Jesus did that?
2. Following Jesus’ parable, he says that Kingdom of God will be taken away from the Pharisees and given to others who will “bear fruit.”
3. Who do you think represents the “Pharisees” today and why? Who are “the others”?
4. Who might be the “Pharisees” in today’s world?
5. Spend some time this week meditating on what “fruit” *you* should produce for God’s Kingdom.
6. As with last week, try to proclaim, at least once each day, the simplest and earliest Christian Creed: “Jesus is LORD!”

#### For the Biblical Scholars

In today’s Gospel passage, Jesus quotes a passage from the Old Testament.

- Where does it come from?
- What is its original context?
- Why would it anger the Pharisees so much?