

PENTECOST 18, A – October 4, 2020
SCRIPTURES – Isaiah 5:1-7; Phil. 3:4-11; Matt. 21:33-46

We hear two parables, or stories, in today's Scriptures, which served as two short sermons. One was preached by Isaiah and the other by Jesus. Each is, frankly, rather depressing. Isaiah tells the people of Israel that they are a vine that God had carefully planted, tended, and protected so that they might bring forth the good fruits of justice and righteousness. But, instead, they had brought forth the bad fruits of bloodshed and oppression. So, God would destroy them. Jesus takes Isaiah's parable and changes it a bit. He adds tenants to the vineyard and so preaches, not to the people of Israel, but to their religious leaders. Jesus declares that they have not simply failed to teach the people properly and so failed God, the vineyard owner. They have opposed Him and acted violently against Him. Because of this, **"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."** Boy: great sermons! Destruction and death are coming! It makes you wonder: why did Isaiah and Jesus bother preaching these parables? Was it simply to make people feel bad? Is this what we're to learn?

- You, who are God's vineyard: if you fail to live as and do what He expects (and, don't we all fail?), then there's no hope for you. Expect to be wiped out!
- And me, your teacher and pastor: if I fail to give God the fruits that He expects, then I am a wretch and can also expect to be wiped out.

Amen! Nice sermon, Pastor. Thanks for the positive, uplifting message!

Well, these two parables are God's true messages to you and to me this morning, and we do need to consider them very seriously. I would like to do so through the words of another follower of Jesus and pastor of His people: the apostle Paul. He tells us in his letter to the Philippians, **"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. I do not consider that I have made it my own. But 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."** Paul helps us greatly as we consider our lives, and what God expects of us.

First, **"not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect."** Boy, if Paul could say this of himself, how much more can each of us say this of ourselves! We are far, far from perfect; and God knows this far better than we do. Nothing is hidden from Him! The Lord knows when His pastor fails to speak to a parishioner to warn him of his sin... and He knows when you ignore His warning and cling to your sin. He knows when we do what is best for ourselves instead of what will help another. I mean, look: we are all sinners who are weak in faith. We naturally think of ourselves first. How can we ever hope to bring forth fully and perfectly the fruits that God expects, and that are pleasing to Him? We cannot. How, then, can we expect God, who considers our actions – who knows the intent behind them, the attitude in them, and the final result of them – to consider us righteous and our actions good? Again: we cannot. Paul also knew that he could not. In fact, he not only knew that he was no better than us; he even

considered himself to be the worst of sinners, for, before his conversion to Christ, he had opposed Him by oppressing His people. He was a wretch who deserved a miserable death!

And yet, he was not afraid that God's anger would fall on him in judgment. He was not downcast and depressed, and so timid and afraid to act. Not at all! **"I press on,"** he said. **"I strain forward to what lies ahead."** What enabled him to live so confidently... purposefully... even joyfully? **"because Christ Jesus has made me his own."** Paul knew that Jesus not only knew Him and cared for him. **"[He] has made me his own,"** and that meant that all that was Paul's was owned by Jesus and was His.

- His sins were Christ's... and Jesus paid the penalty for them – God's anger and judgment – on the cross. There were none to be held against him, then!
- Paul's status in the world – who he was in society because of his background... the favor he had earned from others because of his efforts – was unimportant, because he belonged to Christ. His status in society and the favor of others were unimportant, then. Paul therefore said: **"whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."**
- Paul's works, the fruits of his efforts to now serve God through Jesus, were also Christ's... and were made perfect and beautiful in Him, and offered to the Father through Him.

If Christ has made you His own – and He has, for in your baptism He took you to Himself, took you as His; and all that is His is yours, simply through faith in Him – then what was true for Paul is also true for you. Your life is Christ's! Your life is safe and secure in Him, and every day is a new day to rejoice and live confidently in Him!

So: what shall we do? How shall we live? Paul tells us: **"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."** Notice; Paul doesn't say toward the prize of heaven, but **"toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."** Paul's desire and goal is to hear God's call to Christ! God's voice, His call: that's the prize! Why? Because to hear God's voice is everything! When sin and guilt oppress you, He calls you upward to the cross, to see in Christ's sacrifice for you the forgiveness of your every sin. When wondering about your life and what you should do, God calls you to lift up your head and know not only the guidance you have in Christ for your life, but also His blessing upon your life; a blessing that is yours simply through faith. **"[I do not have] a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,"** says Paul, **"but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."** And then, when the end of your life nears, God calls you to lift up your head to the resurrection to a life that will be new, and eternal in heaven, in Jesus, who Himself was resurrected from the dead and ascended to God's right hand in heaven. All of this, and every blessing of God that is part of this, is in God's voice; in His call to trust in His Son.

Press on, then, to hear God's voice in the Bible; in His preaching to you through the voice of His prophets, like Isaiah, and His apostles, like Paul. Above all, press on to hear the voice of His Son, Jesus. Even when they speak words of rebuke and warning, they do so because God Himself works hard and strains for far more than your judgment. His goal is not to make you feel bad. He is seeking your repentance, your acknowledgement of sin and hope in Christ for mercy. He will surely grant it in Him!

Press on, then, ***“toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*** You will find forgiveness of your every sin and the renewal of life every day in Christ Jesus! In His holy name. Amen.