

Matthew 21:33-46

Jesus said to them “Listen to another parable” (Matthew 21:33-46, Parable of the Wicked Tenants, Proper 22A). He could have just said, “Get ready for another confrontation between the Pharisees and me.” Regardless of what you think about the Pharisees you’ve got to give them some credit today. They got it. They understood the parable. They heard Jesus. “They realized he was talking about them.” Jesus held before them a truth they didn’t like and they wanted to put a stop to it. They wanted to arrest him.

This is neither Jesus’ first nor his last confrontation with the Pharisees. We tend to avoid those with whom we have conflict and confrontation. But not Jesus. He just keeps on coming. At every turn he is offending, aggravating, and confronting the Pharisees. He eats with the wrong people. He won’t answer their questions. He taunts them by breaking the law and healing on the Sabbath. He calls them hypocrites and blind leaders. He escapes their traps. He leaves them speechless. He rattles off a string of “woes” against them. He compares them to a disobedient son who will not work in the vineyard. They just can’t catch a break with Jesus. He never lets up.

So what’s that all about? Why can’t he just let go of them? And what does that have to do with us?

Is Jesus looking for a fight? I don’t think so. Is his primary motivation to expose and condemn those who do not follow him? I don’t think so. Is he keeping score and naming all the attitudes and behaviours of the Pharisees that he considers

wrong? I don’t think so. Is Jesus trying to exclude from the kingdom of God the religious leaders of his day? I don’t think so.

Here’s what I think these confrontations are about. Jesus is unwilling to give up on the Pharisees, or anyone else for that matter. Jesus is unwilling to give up on you or me. He just keeps on coming. That is the good news, hope, and joy in today’s parable. This is not so much a parable of exclusion or condemnation as it is a parable of Jesus’ unwillingness to give up. His unwillingness to give up on us often confronts us with truth about our lives that is almost always difficult to hear and accept. We might hear his words but do we realize he is taking about us?

This parable and the confrontation this parable provokes are like a mirror held before us so that we might see and recognize in ourselves what Jesus sees and recognizes. This is not to condemn us but to recover us from the places of our self-exclusion, to call us back to life, and to lead us home.

Jesus doesn’t exclude us or anyone else from the kingdom of God. He doesn’t have to. We do it to ourselves and we’re pretty good at it. That’s what the Pharisees have done. The Pharisees have excluded themselves.

“The kingdom of God will be taken away from you,” Jesus says to them. This is not so much a punishment for failing to produce kingdom fruits. It is, rather, the recognition of what already is. They were given the vineyard and failed to

produce and share the fruits of the kingdom. Jesus is just naming the reality, the truth. They have excluded themselves. In the same way, the kingdom of God will be given to those who are already producing kingdom fruits. This is not a reward but a recognition of what already is. Where the fruit is, there also is the kingdom.

If you want to know what the fruits of the kingdom look like then look at the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ. What do you see? Love, intimacy, mercy and forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, presence, wisdom, truth, healing, reconciliation, self-surrender, joy, thanksgiving, peace, obedience, humility. I'm not talking about these things as abstract ideas but as lived realities in the vineyards of our lives.

We've all been given vineyards. They are the people, relationships, circumstances and events of our lives that God has entrusted to our care. That means our spouse and marriage, children and family, our work, our church, our daily decisions and choices, our hopes, dreams, and concerns are the vineyards in which we are to reveal the presence and life of God, to produce the fruits of the kingdom. The vineyards, our work in those vineyards, and the fruit produced come together to show us to be sharers in God's kingdom; or not.

To the degree we are not producing kingdom fruits we have excluded ourselves from and rejected our share in the kingdom. We are living neither as the people God knows us to be nor as the people we truly want to be. In some way we have stepped outside of ourselves and sidestepped our own

life. That's the truth with which Jesus confronted the Pharisees. It's the same truth with which Jesus confronts us.

How does that happen? What does self-exclusion look like? Here's what I'm wondering.

- Do you ever struggle with perfectionism, self-condemnation, and the question of whether you're enough? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Do you ever feel like you have to be in control, be right, have all the answers? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Are you carrying grudges, anger, resentment? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Do you look at others and begin making judgments about their belief, choices, or lifestyle? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Are there people in your life that you have chosen to let go of rather than do the work of reconciliation and heal the relationship? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Do you go through life on auto-pilot, going through the motions but never really being present, never showing up? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- In your life is there more criticism and cynicism than thanksgiving and celebration? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Are you hanging onto some old guilt that you believe could not be forgiven? Maybe that's self-exclusion.

The antidote to our self-exclusion from God's kingdom begins with first recognizing that self-exclusion. That means we must look at the vineyards of our lives. So, how's your garden growing? What do you see? Is there fruit? Is there life? Are you sharing in God's kingdom?

Over to you!

Amen