

10/5/08

**THE SALUTATION AND COLLECT OF THE DAY** Merciful God, Master of the Vineyard, Lord of the Harvest, You have planted us in Your vineyard to produce fruit because of Your loving care. We are Your people, the vine You have planted. Nourish us with Your Word. Empower us always with Your Spirit, that we may press toward the goal to which You have called us in Jesus Christ. Help us to be fruitful in lives of good and righteousness as we await the return of Your Son, our Lord and Savior, who lives and reigns with You and the Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**THE OLD TESTAMENT LESSON** Isaiah 5: 1-7

(A sad song about God's vineyard)

1 I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. 2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. 3 "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? 5 Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. 6 I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it." 7 The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

**THE EPISTLE LESSON** Philippians 3:4b-14

(Paul gives up all to follow Jesus.)

4 though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. 7 But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward

the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

**THE GOSPEL LESSON** Matthew 21:33-46

*(Jesus warns the leaders that the vineyard will be taken from them.)*

33 "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. 35 "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way.

37 Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. 38 "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' 39 So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

40 "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." 42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? 43 "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. 44 He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. 46 They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

INTRODUCTION - My first year as pastor Kathy and I lived in the church parsonage, next door to St. Paul Lutheran in the inner city of St. Louis. One night in November a lady and five children showed up on my doorstep. It was the first freezing night of the year. Her children were in her station wagon. She had an apartment picked out, and a partial check from a local Catholic Church to pay part of the rent, but she did not have the rest of the money. I asked about a church affiliation. She was not active. I told her I would help and went with her to her future land lord and gave him a check for the rest of the first month's rent. However, I also told her I wanted to meet with her to talk more about God's love, and to discuss budgeting. We set an appointment.

The lady did not show up for the appointment, but a week later showed up with her boyfriend. They wanted me to buy them some appliances. When I tried to talk about God's love, the church, and budgeting. They wanted nothing to do with it. The man was somewhat defiant. They left.

A couple of months later someone else showed up on my doorstep. This time it was an FBI agent. He asked me about this couple. It seemed they were living off donations from churches, leaving the children alone, and using his salary from General Motors to purchase drugs.

Time after time these people had a chance to do the right thing. They were taught, spoken to, encouraged, even prayed with. They obviously visited many churches in addition to the church where I was pastor. But they resisted. They did what they wanted. They were even defiant when others tried to encourage them to behave in ways that would have been best and healthiest for them, and for their children.

I. It is easy to say that we are not like that, we are not criminals, we are God's children, we are not rebellious. But, let me tell you two other stories.

I have talked about baptism with a lot of people lately. When discussing baptism with parents of young children, sometimes the question comes up, "Can children be sinful?" I ask them, "Have you seen any selfish behavior, any tantrums? Did you teach that?" You see, all people struggle with selfish, rebellious disobedience.

But, maybe this story will hit home even more. In January 2002 I was beginning my doctoral program. One of the 3 classes I had to take that first week was a psychological evaluation of my personality and ministry. I actually felt pretty good about what the evaluation said. But, there was one assessment by the counselor that I shared with my family. You should have seen their eyes light up. He said, "According to your answers, on the one hand you have an adventurous spirit. On the other hand, you don't like to obey rules very much. That can be sort of dangerous." My wife and kids laughed, "You like to make other people obey rules, but you don't like to do it yourself." Imagine, this test suggested there is a rebellious streak in your pastor. We all struggle with selfish, rebellious, disobedience.

So, and this may apply to you, I was talking with a seminary professor in June 2004. I was talking about ministry challenges, and mentioned this assessment by the Seminary counselor. He said, "So, you are adventurous, and you don't like to obey rules. You've become like your people. You've become Alaskan." What do you think? Is he right?

A. In our Gospel Lesson today Jesus tells a parable in His day that reflects the Old Testament parable of Isaiah 5. Jesus is telling the Jews of His day that they have been selfish, rebellious, and defiant. They have neglected the prophets. They even rejected God's own Son, and would kill Him. They did what they wanted, even though it separated them from God, and even though it caused them harm.

B. We *all* struggle with selfish, rebellious, disobedience. There are ways that we are tempted, and try not to sin, but we still do what we know is wrong. There are ways that we don't even know we are being led astray, but we follow our desires and our will, and live for ourselves and sin against God. And, there are ways that we know our behavior is wrong, and we just don't care. We are going to do what we are going to do. No one else can tell us what to do, not even God. By the way, does that sound Alaskan?

II. That's what makes this parable so amazing.

A. If someone rejects you, ignores you, hurts you, will you go and keep going to them in love? Or will you write them off, put them out of your life?

B. Jesus is the Son of God. Our thoughts, our actions, our rebellion and defiance have hurt our heavenly Father. Our sin put God's Son to death. Yet, God did not give up. He came calling people to His love, to His forgiveness. He sent Jesus His Son. He sent His Son to pay the price for the rebellion of the Jews and all people. Jesus came to die for those rejecting Him, because He loves them.

C. God comes to us today, in this parable, in His Word, in the Sacrament. Yes, the parable points to our rebellion and defiance and sin. But, Jesus is coming to call sinners. Jesus is coming to us, in spite of our sin. Jesus comes to call us to believe He is the Son of God who died for our sin, and to receive forgiveness, and to live like His children.

III. I wish I could tell you those people in St. Louis changed. But I cannot. However, I can tell you that many people, people I have known, people who weren't always raised as Christians, but people who knew the trouble of their rebellious lives, these people were surprised by the mercy and love of God. These people turned to God and let Him change their lives.

A. I need to tell you that this month we are using the assigned readings to examine Behavior of Christians that sets us apart from the rest of the world.

1. Actually, the Word "Holy" means "set apart."

2. This month we are examining behavior of Christians that makes us unique, sets us apart, and today that behavior is "willingly obedient."

3. Christians, instead of continuing their ways of rebellion, seek to willingly do God's will, to love God and love others.

B. You cannot do this by your own strength, commitment, or will. The only way to change your rebellious ways, the only way to live willingly obedient, loving lives, is a changed heart.

C. That is why Jesus came. We rebelled against Him, and He came to us. We defy God's will, and He calls us to forgiveness. We deserve punishment and death and this parable tells us that. But, at the same time God offers forgiveness and eternal life in heaven as a gift, through faith in Jesus.

1. When people, when we realize we are like the rebellious people in this parable, and that our rebellion causes us pain, and problems, and death, and when we realize that God still reaches out in love, when we truly realize that, it changes our hearts.

2. You see, God acts in ways we would not expect, if we are honest. The love, the forgiveness of God changes our hearts.

CONCLUSION - This year I got to testify about that change in court. I was a witness for someone, and the prosecutor, I believe, tried to trick me. She asked, "Do you believe Christians are more likely to behave?" I told her that all people can fail. What changes people to live healthy, righteous lives is a changed heart. I told her, the unexpected love of God changes Christians, when they know that love.

I pray that the love of God surprises you, and that the fruit of God's love in your lives is that unique Christian characteristic, WILLING OBEDIENCE to our loving God. Amen.