

Welcome to the Vineyard

Matthew 21:33-46

INTRODUCTION

Today's sermon begins with a public service announcement for all of you who might be looking for a vacation adventure next summer. You will need to act quickly on this because the opportunity won't last long.

According to the website "www.recreation.gov" our National Forest Service rents out unmanned lookout towers during the summer months. The average cost per night is around \$40, far cheaper than even a Holiday Inn Express. Think about it!

- You too could be sleeping on an air mattress more than 100 feet above the ground.
- The view outside your windows will be wonderful, but unfortunately breakfast and bathrooms are not included the price.
- In many cases you will need to hike to your rental. These towers are in very remote locations
- And in all cases you will need to carry your own luggage up the stairs.
- By the way, your dog is welcome, but be forewarned ... Most dogs get afraid of the climb after a few feet, so you will most likely need to carry him/her up and down the stairs.

Now, whether it is in one of our National Forests or in a vineyard as described in the parable today, towers all share a single purpose. From the very top you can see if anything is creating a threat to the area you are watching. A fire. Uninvited critters. Poachers. And much more.

Today is the second sermon in my series titled "Tell Me a Story." These sermons will run throughout the months of October and November and all of them will be based on events that happen in the last week of the earthly life of Jesus. Why the last week? Because the last Sunday in November is "Christ the King Sunday," a day we celebrate that Jesus always wins. He will always reign as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

Most of these sermons – and today is no exception – are based on stories told by Jesus. Parables. Simple stories with deep meanings. Stories of our faith and God's interaction with people. These are stories that tell us what God's kingdom is like and how Christ reigns in it. Like last week, this story involves a vineyard.

Throughout all the Old Testament the vineyard is an image to portray the nation of Israel. You heard that stated clearly in today's first reading:

The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. (Isaiah 5:7)

So in keeping with the simplicity of that truth, the owner in today's text should be understood as God Himself. This is a story about God. And it is a story about the people of God who live in His vineyard. That includes us.

In the days of Jesus there was a lot of hardship in the land of Israel. Money was scarce. People couldn't afford much.

- So it was fairly common for someone who had money – even an outsider who had money – to buy up large pieces of property – like vineyards – and hire other people to work there.
- Typically, these absentee landlords had little day-to-day interest in the working of the vineyard.
- But they expected a good return on their investment, a good crop and a prompt rent payment at the end of the season.

As you might expect because times were hard, the workers got a little testy at rent collection time. In fact, in our story today, two of the owner's employees were killed by those who worked in the vineyard for no other reason than they were trying to make the collection. So the owner thought he should send his son to make the collection, because ...

"Surely," (the owner) thought, "they will respect my son." (Matthew 21:37)

But as they did with the two employees who had come before:

When the farmhands saw the son arrive, they rubbed their hands in greed. "This is the heir! Let's kill him and have it all for ourselves." They grabbed him, threw him out, and killed him. (Matthew 21:38-39)

It is impossible to read and hear this story without pausing to think about we who inhabit the vineyard respond to what God has entrusted to us. Or put another way ... how we who inhabit the Kingdom of God respond to what God has entrusted to us. Let me quickly identify four truths:

TRUTH #1: WE HAVE BEEN BLESSED IN COUNTLESS WAYS

One writer says this:

Breathe your next breath with awe and wonder. Feel your pulse. Our hearts faithfully beat and send blood through our system. Think with your mind. What a magnificent capacity of intellect God has given us. Sense the emotions you can express. Capture the freedom and power of your will. God has not left anything out. You have been wonderfully equipped to live fully and joyously. (*Lloyd John Ogilvie, p. 277*)

If it were not for the owner, these workers would have no income. They lived on the owner's land. Their ability to provide for their families came from the owner's land. Their dignity came from the owner's land.

Have you ever stopped to "Count Your Blessings" as the old hymn encourages us to do?

Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God has done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

Counting your blessings is a great spiritual discipline, by the way. Get a notebook and list one each day. The first 30 will be easy, and you won't see the value. But stick with it for at least 90 days – through the end of this calendar year. Each day list one blessing. One and no more. And then give God thanks for it.

It will help you remember that the owner of the vineyard has been very good to us!

TRUTH #2: WE RISK TROUBLE WHEN WE THINK IT ALL BELONGS TO US

Have you ever noticed are the smallest words get us into the biggest trouble? Words like ...

I, my, mine

From our earliest days we are encouraged to share the credit. Listen to the athlete who just pitched the best game of her career. She will talk about how it is always a "team effort." The catcher called a great game, the shortstop made some incredible plays, the outfielder got a key hit.

There's no "I" in TEAM!

I filled in for a pastor friend of my several years ago while he was on vacation. He was preaching a series of sermons out of the book of Daniel, and he wanted me to focus on the sinful pride of King Nebuchadnezzar. I created this graphic for my sermon that day.



It's a problem for all of us. We start out working for the Lord, but then we want the Lord to start working for us. We want to call the shots. We want to decide what God should do. And if He doesn't do it, we throw Him out. The smallest word of all creates a mountain of trouble for us.

There is absolutely nothing the Lord withhold from us if we tell the world around us that the glory belongs to Him. Praise and adoration are He desires from us. God is in search of people who will humbly acknowledge Him as the source of the blessings He longs to pour out.

The truth is that none of this belongs to us. It all belongs to God, and the earlier we realize that, the better it will be for us. Psalm 24 begins with these familiar words:

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it...
(Psalm 24:1)

TRUTH #3: WE WILL ALL BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR WHAT WE HAVE DONE

Or not done, for that matter. There is a time coming for all of us when the issue about who gets to be in charge of our lives has to be settled once and for all.

- One of my early ministry mentors, a pastor of a good sized congregation in the Midwest, lost his church as the result of a tragic moral indiscretion. "I thought I was above accountability and I ran my life as if it belonged to me. Then it happened. I did something I never thought I would do. Now I've lost everything."

The price of accountability is often very high. Families can be shattered, marriages can be in shambles, careers can be upended.

- In our parable, failure to acknowledge the rightful place of the owner cost them the vineyard. Even the religious leaders who were angry with Jesus saw that point.

(Jesus asks) "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," (the religious leaders) replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." (Matthew 21:40-41)

If I ended my sermon here, it would probably be very realistic. That is how such stories go in the kingdom of this world. But that ending wouldn't be very helpful to those of us who want to live in the Kingdom of our God. You see, there's more to the story ... IF ... we are willing to move from the last week of Jesus' life to Easter and Pentecost.

- If we were to climb back up in the tower so that we can see more clearly, we would see that the owner's son is coming back down the path.
- Only this time there are nail prints in his hands and there would be a wound from a spear in his side.

TRUTH #4: GOD IS READY TO FORGIVE

The same God who holds us accountable refuses to close the door on us.

- There is no failure, sin or arrogant demand that He will not forgive if ... we humbly come to Him and ask.
- The Resurrection tells us that. The conversion of Saul of Tarsus tells us that.

Romans 8 tells us:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the

future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35, 37-39)

Because of Easter, we can be assured that God continues to send His Son – even though He was rejected by us before. His love continually pursues us.

APPLICATON

As long as you live and can breathe a breath, there is a chance for you to welcome Him into His vineyard. He longs for you to say:

Lord, my life is Your vineyard. All that I am and all that I have is Yours, even though I have acted like it all belongs to me. Forgive me. Thank You for continuing to show me Your love for me even though I have rejected it many times before.

And when you do, God will respond:

I love you. You are my cherished possession. Come, let us enjoy the vineyard together.

With the Psalmist we say:

Praise the Lord, all you nations.
Praise him, all you people of the earth.
²For his unfailing love for us is powerful;
the Lord's faithfulness endures forever.
Praise the Lord! (Psalm 117)

Amen