

Pentecost 19 – October 4, 2026 – Deacon John Riherd

For three years Jesus had been traveling all over what was then Palestine teaching, preaching, healing, curing and bringing the good news of salvation and the kingdom of God to anyone who would listen. In many ways it had been a rough and grueling three years. It began with baptism in the Jordan River. Then he was led into the desert without food or water for forty days. Imagine having the devil as your only visitor for those forty days. And he came three times! After his first public preaching in his home synagogue, his townspeople threw him out. He surrounded himself with twelve men who could be quarrelsome and shall we say “difficult,” at times. |

He attracted large crowds, but all too often the crowds that came to hear him preach were more interested in seeing what miracle he might perform. Then they just drifted off without understanding the message they had just heard or witnessed and how it could change their lives for eternity. |

Many wanted a circus act more than they wanted to change. No, he was not the savior most expected. The Romans were still oppressing them, often with very brutal means. Jesus was not a militant rebel. They believed peaceful words would never defeat Rome. Even his own disciples still did not fully understand who he was. |

And so, in today’s gospel we find Jesus in Jerusalem for the last time. He knows the fate that is coming. He is preaching in the Temple area where he has just angrily cleared the temple of the money changers and vendors. He has been curing people who have come to him. He has a large crowd listening to him. |

And then here they come. A group of Chief Priests and Pharisees. A band of self-righteous men intent on entrapping Jesus so they can carry out their plans to have him killed. They fear him and the threat he brings to their authority and relationship with Rome. He knows this. Jesus is growing more frustrated that these religious leaders, who should have recognized him as the Messiah are constantly testing him and telling the people not to listen to him. |

Jesus must have been thinking: Surely, I have given them enough signs of who I am; my authority from God; and the power given me over natural events. Jesus may have briefly reflected on just a few of the signs he had performed to show God’s love for his people, such as: |

- Raising Lazarus from the dead. |

- Multiplying loaves and fishes to feed 5,000 people. |
- Walking on water and calming the stormy seas. |
- Turning water into wine. |
- Teaching the Sermon on the Mount wherein the Beatitudes outlined how the world would be turned upside down in his kingdom. The blessed ones were the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for seeking justice and fairness. |
- Driving out demons from people possessed. |
- Numerous cures of blindness, withered limbs, hemorrhaging, and leprosy along with many other ailments, all without respect to class. |
- Eating with sinners and outcasts rather than the wealthy and powerful. |

But the people and their religious leaders were not getting the message. And that sets the stage for this parable. We can almost feel his frustration and his anger. Jesus is running out of time to get his message across. So, he gives one of his most pointed parables. Let's break it down. |

In interpreting a parable, it is normally a first principle that every parable has only one point and that the details are not to be stressed. But in this case, it is different. In this parable the details do have a meaning and the chief priests and the Pharisees well knew what Jesus was meaning this parable to say to them. And the people in the crowd knew as well. |

Every detail is founded on what, for those who heard it, was familiar fact. The Jewish nation as the vineyard of God was a familiar prophetic picture. The hedge was a thick-set thorn hedge, designed to keep out both the wild boars who might ravage the vineyard, and the thieves who might steal the grapes. Every vineyard had its wine press. The tower served a double purpose. It served as a watchtower, from which to watch for thieves when the grapes were ripening; and it served as a lodging for those who were working in the vineyard. |

The actions of the owner of the vineyard were all quite normal. In the time of Jesus, Palestine was a troubled place with little luxury; it was very common for landowners to be absentee landlords, who let out their estates and were interested only in collecting the rental at the right time. The rent

might be paid in any of three ways. It might be a money rent; it might be a fixed amount of the crop; and it might be an agreed percentage of the crop.

Even the action of the cultivators was not out of the ordinary. The country was seething with economic unrest; the working people were discontented and rebellious; and the action of the cultivators in seeking to eliminate the son was not by any means impossible.

It would be easy for those who heard this parable to make the necessary identifications. The vineyard is the nation of Israel, and its owner is God. The cultivators are the religious leaders of Israel, who God had charged with the welfare of the nation. The messengers who were sent successively are the prophets sent by God who so often were rejected and killed by the people and their leaders. The son who came last is none other than Jesus himself.

This parable has much to tell us:

1. It has much to tell us about God.

It tells of God's trust in people. The owner of the vineyard entrusted it to the cultivators. He did not stand over them to supervise. He went away and left them with their task. God pays humans the compliment of entrusting them with God's work. Every task we receive is a task given us to do by God.

a. It tells of God's patience. The master sent messenger after messenger. He did not come with sudden vengeance when one messenger had been abused and ill-treated. He gave the cultivators more chances to respond to his appeal. God bears with humans in all their sinning and will not easily cast them off.

b. It tells of God's judgment. In the end the master of the vineyard would take the vineyard from the cultivators and give it to others.

2. It has much to tell us about people

a. It tells of human privilege. The vineyard was equipped with everything, the hedge for security, the wine press, and the tower, all which would make the task of the cultivators easy and enable them to discharge it well. God does not only give us a task to do; God also gives us the means to do it.

- b. It tells of human freedom. The master left the cultivators to do the task as they liked. God is no tyrannical taskmaster; God is like a wise leader who allocates a task and then trusts a person to do it.
 - c. It tells of human accountability. To all of us comes a day of reckoning. We are answerable for the way in which we have carried out the task God gave us to do.
 - d. It tells of the deliberateness of human sin. The cultivators carry out a deliberate policy of rebellion and disobedience towards the master. Sin has been defined as deliberate opposition to God; it is the taking of our own way when we know quite well what the way of God is.
- 3. It has much to tell us about Jesus.
 - a. It tells of the claim of Jesus. It shows us quite clearly Jesus lifting himself out of the succession of the prophets. Those who came before him were the messengers of God. This parable contains one of the clearest claims Jesus ever made to be unique, to be different from even the greatest of those who went before.
 - b. It tells of the sacrifice of Jesus. It makes it clear that Jesus knew what lay ahead. In the parable the hands of wicked men killed the son. Jesus was never in any doubt of what lay ahead. He did not die because he was compelled to die; he went willingly to death.

In this one parable Jesus both summed up the history of Israel and foretold its future. God set up everything in Israel that the people needed to succeed. The people and their leaders did not pay heed to the messengers he sent. So, he sent his own son who would be killed. And then God would take away their right to the fruits of his kingdom.

This parable is not only pointed at the religious leaders and the people of his day. It is also pointed directly at us. Yes, the laborers in the parable represented the religious leaders. They knew what Jesus meant and that only hardened their resolve to remove him. But the people also understood the parable applied to those who rejected Jesus.

What are we doing to labor in the vineyard of the Lord to produce fruit with our labor. One of the messages of the parable is that the owner took the vineyard away from the laborers and gave it to others. We Christians are those “others”. You and I are tasked with continuing the work in the vineyard of the Lord to produce fruit. We have work to do to honor our covenant with God. And, like the laborers in the parable, God gives each of us everything we need to do the tasks he asks us to do. It can be easy, more convenient, to go our own way, and not to do all we are able to work in God’s vineyard. At times our society almost demands it. It is easy to put ourselves, our own wants and needs first, isn’t it? |

But God is a patient vineyard owner. God knows it may take a while for us to figure out what we are to do or how to do it. |

When we follow the Jesus Way, we are workers in God’s vineyard. We are the ones entrusted with making the kingdom present to others. The fruit is our spreading the good news of Jesus and sharing our belief and faith with our lives. The labor we are asked to perform does not have to be difficult. For example, we can smile and say a simple greeting to a person next to us in line at the store; or help with our community dinners; or join with the weekly centering prayer group; seek forgiveness from someone we have harmed; take a meal to a homebound neighbor; call a friend we haven’t spoken with for a long time and is alone; become a Eucharistic Visitor and take communion to one of our members who cannot come to church; or offer a ride to a person who can no longer drive to church. |

As important as our own salvation is, our salvation is not our goal. Our goal is to use the fruits of that salvation to bring others to the realization that God’s love and salvation is for all people. The cultivators in the parable missed that. The kingdom of God, salvation, is not one of those “it’s about me and my reward” type of things. No, it is about what we do for others. The choicest fruit of the vineyard is, I believe, God’s love. God’s love. It is that simple, but so easy to overlook in a busy world focused on the “self.” But that is our task. We are to share God’s love with others. |

So, a challenge for each of this week: Think of one way we can be a worker in God’s vineyard that will produce fruit. Some way that the love of God will be visible. Then do it. |