

Matthew's Gospel is full of parables. This is one that Jesus tells in the middle of growing opposition to him in Jerusalem in the days before his execution. It's called the parable of the wicked tenants.

Jesus is speaking directly to the Jewish priests and the Jewish elders in the Jerusalem Temple, so the audience is not the crowds of regular folks that followed him. But even this audience would've known about the agricultural life in the first century. Wine was a common commodity and there were lots of vineyards where people worked.

But you really can't understand this parable unless you look at its Old Testament background, which we heard as our first reading. It's the prophet Isaiah's allegory of the vineyard, from about eight centuries before Jesus.

It's a prophecy of judgment against the leadership and the inhabitants of Jerusalem who were supposed to be in this covenant relationship with God. But they've broken that relationship. If Jerusalem was the vineyard of the Lord, it was supposed to produce good grapes, but instead it bears wild grapes - grapes too bitter for making wine - grapes that signify the wickedness and sin of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Jesus' audience knew Isaiah had condemned Jerusalem and the leaders of his day with this story of a vineyard and its bad fruit.

Now Jesus comes on the scene. Picture Jesus in the Temple - right in front of you - and he tells you the exact same thing. But in Jesus' parable, there's a "twist." Something unexpected. Characters include the vineyard owner - God. The servants of the owner - the prophets. The tenants who work the vineyard - the chief priests and the elders.

The unexpected character Jesus adds is the son. Now, if you were the owner of a vineyard, living far away, and your servants had been beaten and killed, would your next step be to send your son? That doesn't make any sense, because these people have shown that they don't respect you at all. The only thing you're doing is setting your son up to be put to death.

What kind of crazy father would send his own son to a group of wicked tenants? Well, this is not an ordinary father, and this is not an ordinary son. Obviously, the son represents Jesus, who will be killed by the leaders of Jerusalem. The chief priests and elders in the audience

recognize that the father is going to kill the wicked tenants and then give the vineyard to someone else. They're probably not really happy.

Then Jesus goes back to the Old Testament and brings up a line that I've heard many times, but never meant that much to me, 'the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?' He's quoting Psalm 118. It's a popular Psalm because people would chant it as they celebrated Passover - everybody knew how to sing the melody and all the verses. It was our entrance song today.

Well, just like Jeremiah before him and just like Isaiah, this is an implied threat. Jesus is warning them that the Temple itself is going to come down and his Twelve Apostles are going to be the leaders of the new Israel. No longer will the chief priest be the ruler. So this is a dangerous parable. You could say that this is one of the parables of Jesus that got him killed.

Okay, so what does that mean for us today? I would say that it means at least two things. First - sometimes we as Catholics tend to think of the Church as ours. "I belong to the Church and the Catholic Church belongs to me." Well, there's a sense in which that is true, but there is also a sense in which that's not true.

The Church is not my institution or your institution, it is God's vineyard. We are tenants - the workers in the vineyard, and so our job in the vineyard is not to do our will, our job is to do the will of the vineyard's owner. And the owner of every vineyard wants his vineyard to bear fruit. So we are called to bear fruit.

This parable of the wicked tenants doesn't just apply to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, it applies to us as well. God has called us in the Church "to bear good fruit for good wine."

But if instead of doing that, if we fail to do God's will, if we ignore the cry of the oppressed, we can lose our share in the vineyard of the Lord. "Belief in" and "belonging to" the vineyard is not enough. We also need to do the work that shows that we are true workers in the vineyard of the Lord.

At the beginning of "Respect Life Month," one of the works of the Lord is staring us right in the face. As Catholics, we are called to respect, defend and promote the dignity of every human person, at every

## Homily 27-OT-A 2020.docx

moment and in every condition of that person's life. Like this parish's support of women facing difficult or unexpected pregnancies, especially women in poverty. In this area, women facing this challenge see the Community Pregnancy Center as a place to find help.

We are called to care for and protect human life, especially the lives of the most vulnerable among us. That is why this little parish supports our incarcerated brothers at WCI and LeCI. That is why this little parish supports those in need of food through the Middletown Choice Market. That is why this little parish supports those in search of housing through the Interfaith Hospitality Network. That is why this little parish supports the Community Pregnancy Center. That's part of our work in this little vineyard. Amen?

- Deacon Jack Schaefer