

Does the Shoe Fit?

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, October 25, 2009)

5:1-7 (TEV) ¹ Listen while I sing you this song, a song of my friend and his vineyard:

My friend had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

² He dug the soil and cleared it of stones; he planted the finest vines.

He built a tower to guard them, dug a pit for treading the grapes.

He waited for the grapes to ripen, but every grape was sour.

³So now my friend says, "You people who live in Jerusalem and Judah, judge between my vineyard and me. ⁴Is there anything I failed to do for it? Then why did it produce sour grapes and not the good grapes I expected?"

⁵"Here is what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge around it, break down the wall that protects it, and let wild animals eat it and trample it down. ⁶I will let it be overgrown with weeds. I will not trim the vines or hoe the ground; instead, I will let briars and thorns cover it. I will even forbid the clouds to let rain fall on it."

⁷ Israel is the vineyard of the LORD Almighty; the people of Judah are the vines he planted.

He expected them to do what was good, but instead they committed murder.

He expected them to do what was right, but their victims cried out for justice.

Matthew 21:33-46 (NRSV) ³³"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

⁴¹They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

⁴²Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?"

⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

When Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants in the vineyard, which was the first half of our Gospel lesson, the chief priests and Pharisees who heard it knew exactly what he was talking about, and they did not like it one bit. Or as we might say today, the shoe fit - - and it didn't feel very good.

The interpretation of this parable that the chief priests and Pharisees had, and which has been held for centuries, is that the Jewish people are the guilty tenants. These chief priests and Pharisees knew about their record with the prophets of old. They knew that many had been rejected, beaten, stoned, and even killed. They knew things like this had happened, so the shoe fit, and it pinched.

Jesus came and proclaimed that he was the Son of God. Some of the chief priests and Pharisees were offended, outraged, calling his claim blasphemy, and rejected Jesus, and even more, they were plotting to kill him. They were already scheming before Jesus told this parable. They knew that they were the wicked tenants. The shoe fit, and it hurt.

Through the centuries, this parable has been used as the basis for a new understanding of who God's people are. The Church, Christians, are the "other tenants" that God has now placed in his vineyard. There are many

references to the Church as God's new Chosen People, and just as the Jewish people of the Old Testament were called the People of God, so today, we in the church, we who are followers of Christ, call ourselves the People of God. This is not something we should take pride in, but it is a responsibility, a serious responsibility. We might consider ourselves the new stewards in God's vineyard, but as such, it is every bit as clear that we must give back to God his share from the harvest, and even more important, we must respect the Son, welcome the Son, honor the Son.

So the choice is ours. Will we use the produce of the land wisely? And will we return the correct portion to the owner of the vineyard, to God? This is a tough question, and it is a very personal question that each one of us must answer, based on our own circumstances and abilities.

Not all the Jews rejected Jesus. Some were good stewards and not only respected the son of the landowner, but faithfully followed and obeyed. Think about the disciples, and Mary Magdalene, and Martha and Mary, and Joseph of Arimathea, and Zacchaeus, who agreed to give half his wealth to the poor. This is not a parable about how wickedly the Jews treated the Son of God, but it is a parable about personal responsibility, about stewardship.

It often happens that when a preacher speaks on the topic of Stewardship, folks go home and say, "The preacher was begging for money again." But you know that it is my practice to base my sermons on Scripture. I don't just give you my opinions, although sometimes my opinions do creep in, but I want you to know what the Bible teaches about how we should live, and how to be stewards of God's vineyard. So let's turn to the Bible and ask the question, what does God require of me if I am to be a good steward?

I found in the Old Testament that the word "tithe" is used 30 times. In the Law – Genesis, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, God's people are told to give a tithe back to God. They are to give a tenth of their produce, their harvest, the offspring of their sheep and cattle, and even the herbs in the herb garden. When the Scriptures were rediscovered in the time of Nehemiah, the Jewish people gave renewed emphasis to giving a tithe – in the book of Nehemiah alone, the prophet speaks ten times about giving a tithe to God.

But we are Christians. We follow Jesus Christ. We are people of the New Testament. Let's see what the New Testament says. Oops, not much difference here - the New Testament speaks of giving a tithe to God, in fact, that teaching occurs 7 times in the New Testament. And there are other stories of even more generous giving back to God. Like Zacchaeus, who promised to give half his accumulated wealth to the poor. And the rich young ruler who wanted assurance of eternal life. Jesus told him to sell "ALL" his possessions and give the money to the poor. Oh-oh!

And then in Acts, twice, in chapter 2 and chapter 4, we read that they didn't even own private property. They sold everything and brought the proceeds, laid it at the apostle's feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Maybe we better go back to the Old Testament again. That tithe doesn't sound as bad as some of these New Testament models. Or maybe we should look for some other Scripture lesson entirely. You know, something that doesn't make us quite so uncomfortable. And yet, we need to look at our stewardship, at what we are giving to the church, to the needy and to help others.

Now just in case you are thinking about leaving here and saying the preacher wants us to give more money, I want to make it very clear, that is not the point at all. We will soon be coming to one of my favorite holidays, Thanksgiving. This is the time when we must look at how we are saying thank you to God, because thankfulness is an important, very important part of our stewardship. Are your expressions of gratitude to God sincere? Are your thanks to God really meaningful? Are you being a good steward of what God has given you?

Maybe this parable is for us. Maybe it is supposed to make us all just a little uncomfortable. Does the shoe fit? How does it feel?

We each need to look at our stewardship from time to time, at least once each year, as we have been challenged to do throughout this Stewardship Campaign, and remember that it is a way we show gratitude to God, and an important way that we serve God, as stewards of what God has given to us.

Let us each consider our stewardship and decide, are we worthy of the calling to be stewards in God's vineyard? How will God judge us, in view of this parable? Amen.