

"The Craziest Plot Twist of All" Luke 20:9ff

The Word of the Lord from Luke 20: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. The Vineyard and the Beloved Son

Whenever I read this parable, I end up shaking my head. Nobody acts the way you'd reasonably expect. At times, their actions seem downright absurd. Let's run through the parable, and I think you'll see what I mean.

The owner plants a vineyard and leases it to tenants before he goes into another country. It's a standard arrangement: they do the work, and he gets a percentage of the harvest as rent. So when harvest time comes, he sends a servant to the tenant to collect his share; and here comes crazy plot-twist #1: instead of paying up, the tenants beat the servant and send him away empty-handed. This is, well, unwise, as landowners normally have quite a bit of power and are not known to take such abuse lightly. After all, the tenants haven't just beaten up a servant: they've beaten up a servant sent on the master's authority: the disrespect to the servant is disrespect to him. Expect the goon squad to show up soon.

But here's crazy plot twist #2: it's not the goons who show up. The owner of the vineyard sends a second servant, apparently alone, just like the first. This one gets a beat-down and more: in an act of utter stupidity, the tenants treat him shamefully and send him away empty-handed. They choose again to taunt and shame the owner of the vineyard in which they live.

And what does the owner do? We're way past the stage of "Fool me once, your fault; fool me twice, my fault." Clearly, it's time for some decisive, forceful action. But no: the owner sends another servant. No escort, no hired guns; just another servant. And what do the tenants do? They wound this one and throw him out too. This back-and-forth can't keep going on forever; sooner or later, the owner of the vineyard has got to change his tactics. He's got to show he's serious about the tenants' many sins against him.

It's time for a change in tactics, to haul out the big whuppin' stick. But what does he do? He says, "I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him." Boggles the mind. The tenants have mistreated servant after servant, and now the owner is going to send his beloved son. Shouldn't he know better by now? But perhaps the tenants will respect his son.

They will not, and here's their "brilliant" plan: "This is the heir," they say. "Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours." That's their reasoning: if they kill the son, then the father will give them the vineyard. On what planet would that ever take place? How blind can these tenants be? But that's their plan, and they stick to it: they throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him. And, apparently, they expect the owner—the father of the beloved son—to be impressed.

Jesus then notes that the father will eventually come and destroy the tenants, but let's review. The tenants are so foolish, so blind as to the consequences of their actions that they expect to skate scot-free after killing the landowner's son—more than that, they expect to gain the vineyard! That's foolishness beyond comprehension. But so far, from the parable alone, what do you call the actions of the landowner, who puts servant after servant at risk—

who eventually sends his son to die rather than wipe out the tenants? Does that make any more sense than the thinking of the tenants? This stuff just doesn't happen in real life.

Actually, it does. Here's the next twist in our story: by this parable, Jesus describes exactly what is happening to Him. Again, "vineyard" is code for Israel in parables; and with this parable Jesus is playing off of Isaiah 51. His hearers will know that story well. As the landowner of the parable built the vineyard, so God formed the nation of Israel. He made them His people and gave them the Promised Land. He declared, "You are Mine." He gave them His Law to follow so that they would remain His people. He warned them against turning to false gods; because if they did so, they would forsake Him.

Old Testament Israel had it made in the vineyard. But what did they do? They rebelled against God. They turned to false gods and idols. They embraced all sorts of bad worship and immorality. Did the Lord condemn them right away? No. He sent prophets to warn them of their sin. What did the people do? They ignored Him, rejected the message and persecuted the prophets. In doing so, they were not just wounding or killing a man—they were acting in defiance of God who had sent the man to speak His Word. This was not a good idea.

And how did the Lord respond? He sent more prophets, prophets who kept on warning of judgment and calling to repentance. They didn't come armed with anything but the Word of God, and the tenants responded to God's patient mercy by killing His messengers and rebelling all the more.

You know the names of some of these prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel and others. There were more besides. The Lord made sure that His Word was proclaimed, but the people would not listen. Eventually, because they wanted nothing to do with God, God gave them their wish. The ten tribes were easy pickings for the Assyrians, and the southern tribes fell to the Babylonians some years later. Jerusalem was leveled, its citizens taken into exile. Oh, and what did the Lord do? He kept sending prophets, even to the exiles, calling them to repentance so that they might be forgiven. He brought them back to Jerusalem, making sure His Word was proclaimed to them. Compared to the Lord, the landowner in the parable has nothing in the way of patience at all.

That brings us to our Gospel lesson. At the time Jesus tells the parable, the religion of Judea is not one of trusting in God and His gracious promises. It is the religion of the Pharisees, who teach that you're saved by the good works you do. God has recently sent one last prophet, John the Baptist; and John has been beheaded by Herod for speaking God's Word, with no recorded outcry from the Pharisees.

So now, finally, what has God done? He has sent His own beloved Son into the vineyard to speak to the tenants. Perhaps they will respect His Son.

But they haven't so far, and they're not going to. This is chapter 20 of the Gospel of Luke. Palm Sunday has already gone by. In less than a week, a mob is going to demand that the Son of God be crucified. They're going to drive Him out of the city of Jerusalem, the headquarters of the vineyard, and they're going to kill Him. It's only a matter of a few more days.

Now, between the similarities of the parable to Isaiah 51 and the fact that God the Father called Jesus His "beloved Son" at His baptism, it's pretty apparent what Jesus is saying. But without faith, sinners have an uncanny ability to deny the Word of God and elevate themselves. Look what happens when Jesus tells the end of the parable. He says, "What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and

give the vineyard to others." That seems pretty clear. It also seems pretty deserving for those who would kill the vineyard owner's beloved son. But how do the chief priests and scribes respond? "Surely not!" Not "God forbid that this whole thing should ever happen," but "Surely God would not destroy us for killing His beloved Son." But apart from faith, they don't believe that Jesus is God's beloved Son; and so they believe that when they kill Him, they are actually doing God a favor."

Jesus speaks once again in our text: "What then is this that is written: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." He quotes Psalm 118:22 (Psalm 118!). He tells them that He is the Rock on which God's people will stand forever; and He warns them again that if they reject Him, they will be broken to pieces and crushed.

And how do the "tenants" in the crowd respond? They want to kill Him that very day; and in a few days, they will. Calvary is the ultimate rejection of God by sinful man.

But here's the final plot twist of the story: how does God respond? True to His Word, He uses the death of His beloved Son for the good of sinners. Rather than pinching the world out of existence like an annoying little bug, He uses His Son's death as the Sacrifice for the sins of the world. The Son dies on the cross for the sins of the terminally foolish and faithless tenants who kill Him. Then He rises again three days later—why? To judge and condemn? Payback time? No. Judgment will eventually come; but for now He rises again to declare peace, to declare that His death was for the sins of the world, and that whoever believes in Him will be saved.

After all, remember: Jesus quoted Psalm 118 in this text, just before His death. It's the psalm we chant on Easter Day, a psalm of victory and resurrection, a psalm which also proclaims, "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD." (Psalm 118:17)

The Lord uses the murder of His Son to gain redemption for the sinners who rebel against Him.

That is the craziest plot twist of all.

II. The Patience of the Father

After further review, maybe the parable isn't quite so outlandish after all. That's because it's not about how people are supposed to treat each other; if it were, the parable is just crazy. But the parable is about how sinners treat God and how God treats sinners.

Sinners treat God terribly with disrespect and irreverence. God gives them daily bread and they fail to be thankful. God gives them things to use in service, and they hoard it for themselves and use it to boast of their accomplishments. God gives them bodies and minds to be used for honorable purposes, and they misuse and pollute them both for temporary pleasure in self-destructive ways. God gives spouses, and sinners covet those that they're not married to. God gives family and friends and neighbors to serve, and sinners neglect them or take advantage of them for their own selfish gain. The Lord warns of sin so that sinners repent and don't die, and sinners get ticked off that the Lord would try to save them from death. The Lord says, "Here I am" in His Word and Sacraments, and sinners say, "There's really other stuff that I consider more important."

That's how sinners treat God.

If you take some time for self-examination, you'll confess that that is how you treat God, too. And if your first response is, "No, I don't!," it is only an echo of the scribes in the text saying,

"Surely not." Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, there is no one who seeks after God. This is not a pleasant truth to confess, but it is true all the same and important to confess. As long as you hold onto sins, discount them as something that God doesn't care about, or resent God for telling you they're wrong, then you are not forgiven. You may well be saying, "Jesus died to take away all of my sins," but you're also saying, "I don't want Him to take away quite all of my sins." If you hold onto your sins, then you are not forgiven; and on Judgment Day, you will be crushed. You will not be crushed because God wants to, but because you've refused the gift of grace that He has given to you time and time again.

For this is how God treats sinners: with patience, mercy and grace. 2 Peter 3:9 declares, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." He patiently waits. He continues to send His Word and preachers to proclaim it. He patiently showers you with forgiveness in His Word and Sacraments to keep you in the true faith, even as He patiently gives this dying world more time so that more might hear and be saved.

You will be tempted to believe that God doesn't care: that God doesn't care about sin because He doesn't punish your sin immediately; and that God doesn't care about you, because He doesn't punish those who sin against you immediately. But is certainly not about neglect. It is the patience of God, who suffers long to give grace to the sinner, you and others—even when it means suffering the death of His only, beloved Son to win that grace in the first place. He does not want you to be crushed in judgment. He desires that you be built upon the Rock, Jesus Christ, for eternity. Forgiven for your sins, you are in His vineyard forever.

One of the Lord's many prophets, Joel, declared, "Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13). His grace, His mercy, His patience and steadfast love all yours for the sake of Jesus; because, for the sake of Jesus, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen