

FOOLS

Luke 20:9-20

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series C)

April 7, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday in Lent comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 20, verses 9 through 20. It is on page 744 of the pew Bible. Just a few days before his own death, Jesus tells a sad and nonsensical parable to explain what is about to happen to him. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 20, beginning at verse 9, we read in Jesus' name.

⁹ And he began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. ¹⁰ When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. ¹² And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. ¹³ Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ ¹⁴ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.’ ¹⁵ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “Surely not!” ¹⁷ But he looked directly at them and said, “What then is this that is written:

“ ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’?”

¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

¹⁹ The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. ²⁰ So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is an odd parable. It's my favorite parable. I think most people would pick the parable of the prodigal son, which we heard last week. And I really like that one too, but this one is my favorite. And that might seem kind of strange, because it's kind of dark. It's like one of those movies where everyone dies in the end. It's captivating, and it makes you think, but it kind of leaves you feeling sad when it's over. Everything goes wrong for the bad guys, and they all die. And everything goes wrong for the good guys too, and even though they win in the end, most of them are either injured or dead. In the end there's only one person left standing. I imagine some middle aged to elderly man standing alone in a smoldering vineyard with dead bodies all around him. And one of them is his son. Some movie maker could make it look really sad. It's really a

dark parable, but there's one ray of light: the incomprehensible love of God. And in some strange way, the darkness of the parable makes this light shine all the more brightly.

The interpretation of the parable is fairly simple.

The man is God, more specifically, God the Father. He is the owner of the vineyard.

The vineyard is Israel. Even if we couldn't figure that out on our own, the parable resembles an Old Testament parable from Isaiah 5, where the relationship between God and Israel is compared to the struggles of a man with his vineyard.

The tenants—the literal word for them is “farmers”—are the leaders of the Jews. Jesus is especially pointing his arrows at the scribes and chief priests. And we see in verse 19 that they understood this. But this wasn't a new problem. It had been going on, off and on, for several hundred years. It was a pattern of disobedience going back over a thousand years.

And so the servants of the master are the prophets. We don't have to identify them with any specific prophets, because there was a general pattern of rejecting the prophets and treating them shamefully. We think of prophets like Elijah, who had to flee for his life from the king and queen. We think of Jeremiah, who was persecuted and thrown into a cistern by the priests. Or we think of John the Baptist, who, during Jesus' ministry, had his head chopped off at the orders of King Herod. These are just a few examples of how the leaders of Israel treated the prophets.

Then we get to the son, who is obviously Jesus, the Son of God. And we want to notice the timing. Jesus told this parable during holy week. The day was probably Monday or Tuesday, so this is just three or four days before Good Friday, when these same exact scribes and chief priests demanded that Pilate have Jesus crucified. That's the central event this is leading up to.

And the last people to identify are the “others” whom the man gives the vineyard to after he destroys the wicked tenants. These would be the apostles and, after them, all who would believe in Christ through their testimony. It starts with the twelve disciples, whom Jesus had been teaching. Upon Jesus' resurrection from the dead, he entrusts them with the ministry of the gospel, so that many others will become heirs of the kingdom.

So with these key elements in mind, let's walk through the parable. And as we do this, I want you to pay careful attention to anything that seems odd or foolish. Often, the meaning of a parable is in the parts that just don't make any sense. And, actually, in this parable, there is very little that makes any sense at all. It's a battle of fools. It goes back and forth between the owner and the tenants, with each side being more foolish than the other until it escalates to the extreme and finally ends in a pile of dead bodies. It's like both sides are trying to be more foolish than the other. So in the midst of all this foolishness, look for what is most foolish. What is most absurd about this parable?

It starts very rational. “A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants” (20:9). It's an investment. People do this all the time. If you have money, you invest it in such a way that someone else does all the work, and you get a portion of the profits.

The foolishness begins when the master sends the first servant to collect his share of the harvest. The farmers are greedy and foolish. They want to keep all the profit for themselves, and they apparently think they can get away with not paying. So they don't pay. They beat the first servant and send him away empty-handed (20:10). The farmers are the first fools. We can call this “foolish sin.”

But the owner of the vineyard will not be outdone in foolishness. The obvious rational move is to get the authorities involved. Go to the police. Go to the courts. Demand payment from your

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tenants, evict them, and press charges for assaulting your servant. Any sane person would have done this. But the lord of the vineyard doesn't do it. Plan A was to send a servant to collect payment. And when plan A didn't work, he decides to try plan A again.

Now there's a word. It starts with an S and has six letters. I used it in a sermon once, not knowing that most parents consider it a naughty word and don't want their kids to use it. It has a similar meaning to the word "foolish," but it's a little bit meaner. So I'm not going to say the word this time, but you might be able to guess what it is, and I can't get it out of my head when I think about this parable. Someone defined this word as doing the exact same thing over and over again, but expecting different results. That's what the owner of the vineyard does. He does the exact same thing, as if it might yield a different result. This is one step more foolish than the farmers. We can call this "foolish love." He actually loves the wicked farmers.

But, sure enough, the farmers do the same thing to the second servant. But this time they are a little bit meaner. Instead of just beating him and sending him away empty-handed, they add insult to injury. **"They beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed"** (20:11). This is more foolish than before. They're testing the owner's patience. Just because he put up with it once, doesn't mean he will put up with it again. He still has the law on his side. And if you act even worse than before, it is more likely he will punish you.

So the farmers persist in their foolishness, but so does the owner of the vineyard. At this point it starts to seem like he's trying to be foolish. *I know what I'll do! I'll try plan A again!* He sends a third servant. At this point his servants are probably starting to look for other employment. Working for this guy is hazardous.

And, of course, the farmers also persist in their foolishness. There is an obvious pattern developing. They treat the third servant even worse than the other two. They beat him, just like the first two, but he is also wounded. They did not simply inflict pain; they broke his body. And instead of simply sending him away empty-handed, they throw him out of the vineyard (20:12). Imagine you're standing outside of the vineyard when, all of the sudden, some guy with a broken leg comes flying out of the gate.

This is really getting out of hand. So the owner of the vineyard thinks to himself, **"What shall I do?"** (20:13). And he comes up with an idea that is a lot like plan A, except worse. Let's call it "plan A, extra foolish." As we hear the parable, it's like it starts to go in slow motion, and we think to ourselves, *Oh, no; don't do that!* It's like when little kids are really into a movie, and they know the main character is about to walk into danger, so they're all screaming at the TV, "No! Stop!" But the person in in the TV can't hear them, so they persist in their foolishness. The lord of the vineyard says, **"I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him"** (20:13).

Or, perhaps not! If these farmers were smart—like most farmers are—they would respect the beloved son. But then they also would have respected the servants before him. There's a pattern developing here, and if you don't recognize it, you are just as foolish as the wicked farmers.

So the son goes to collect the share of the harvest. The farmers see the son and reason with each other, **"This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours."** (20:14). This statement is a nominee for the most absurd part of the parable. Apparently, none of the farmers went to law school. Or, if they did, they slept through the class on inheritance law, because that is not how inheritance law works. The property does not pass to the people who murder the heir. So if you're thinking of murdering some rich person's kid, don't do it; it won't work. The property stays inside the family. This was especially true in Jewish law. They kept careful track of who belonged to what clan. So even if the lord of the vineyard doesn't have any other sons or daughters, there is always some brother or cousin or nephew or some relative the land will pass

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to. It doesn't go to the murderers of the heir. This is just absolute foolishness. They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Finally, the lord of the vineyard takes what seems like a rational step. He comes to his vineyard, destroys the wicked farmers, and gives it to others (20:16). He has finally had it with these wicked and foolish farmers, and he does what he should have done at the beginning. The only difference is that the judgment would have been far less severe at the beginning. This is about the first thing that makes any sense.

The people listening to the parable say to Jesus, "Surely not!" (20:16). But it's not the judgment against the farmers they object to. It's the whole parable. They understand what it means. They understand that it means Jesus is going to be killed. That is what they object to. They understand that it means Israel will be taken away from its leaders and given to others. That is what they object to. *The leaders of Israel are going to kill the Son of God? No way! That's so foolish it would never happen!*

But it does happen.

Now this sounds like the height of all foolishness. "Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours." *Let's kill the Son of God, so that the kingdom will be ours.* For a while this seemed like the most foolish and absurd part of the parable. But my uncle helped me out and reminded me that this was the owner's plan all along. He knew how this was going to go, and he actually wanted it to go this way. And that is the height of all foolishness. God wins the battle of fools.

When God sent prophets into the world, he knew what would happen to them. He usually even told the prophets beforehand how it would go. When God sent his Son into the world, he knew how it would go. And the Son also knew how it would go. They knew he would be rejected and killed. But God loved the world. So knowing this did not dissuade him from sending his Son into the world. In fact, this was the very reason the Father sent the Son into the world. God loved the world, no matter how foolish it may seem. Jesus, on the cross, he's got some kind of foolish love flowing out his veins.

Now, I've been calling this foolish. And perhaps it makes you uncomfortable to think of the Almighty God as foolish. According to the wisdom of man, the Almighty God is foolish. "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18). "Christ crucified [is] a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23-24). What we see as utter weakness—a condemned criminal, dead on a cross—is the height of God's power. What we see as total foolishness—sending your Son into the world, knowing he will be killed—is the height of God's wisdom.

God desires other things—things we don't understand. His own life? He's not so concerned about preserving it. His kingdom? He's not interested in keeping it to himself. Notice what the lord of the vineyard does at the end. He gives the vineyard to others. He doesn't find new tenants. He finds new heirs. What had been leased to tenants is now given to others. It's important to notice this is a gift.

And it is given precisely because Jesus, as the cornerstone, was rejected. The kingdom is given because Jesus died. His death atones for your sins and makes you a worthy recipient of the kingdom. He died in order to distribute his inheritance.

So upon his resurrection from the dead, Jesus entrusts the ministry of the Gospel to his apostles. But they are not hired workers. They are not servants or renters. They are coheirs with Christ. And they are commanded to go and preach this good news—to proclaim the forgiveness

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of sins, because the kingdom is not given only to them. It is given to all who hear and believe this proclamation. It is given to you. The inheritance passes to you.

Remember, this is holy week—probably Monday, maybe Tuesday. In a couple days Jesus will be eating the Passover with his disciples when he picks up a cup of wine and says, “**This cup is the New Testament in my blood which is shed for you, and for many, for the forgiveness of sins.**” *Testament*—as in a last will and testament, which goes into effect upon the death of the testator. And the very next day he is led to the cross, where he pours out that blood for the forgiveness of sins, so that everyone who trusts in this sacrifice and drinks this cup becomes an heir of his kingdom. He comes into the world, and he goes to the cross, knowing he will be rejected and killed. This is precisely why he comes, because this is how he makes you an heir of his kingdom.

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
This is the LORD’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.” (Ps. 118:22-23).

Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.