LAKEWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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The Cornerstone
Matthew 21: 33-46

Thanks to Connor Alexis and Ti-yon for serving as liturgists this Sunday.
When you think of a vineyard, you may have lovely images appear in your mind. It reminds us that this is where the wine we love begins, when we visit vineyards, it is usually as a tourist, we take pictures, we are in wine country, it is beautiful, something to share with everyone. But have you ever been the one to harvest the grapes? Most connoisseurs would say that hand picked grapes make better wine than machine harvested grapes. I don't know enough about that, and I have never been grape harvesting. But when I was a kid, I did go berry picking, and it was hard work. My family went a few times to pick strawberries or blackberries or raspberries. There was no pressure to pick an awful lot, my mum just wanted enough so that she could make some jam. To be honest I was a terrible berry harvester because I liked strawberries. I would eat more than I picked.
But I saw the real berry pickers, the ones who took the harvest seriously, there was a camaraderie among them, they made a difference to the field. When I think of the vineyard, in Jesus' story I don't think of a beautiful winery out in California, I think of these folks getting their hands dirty. Doing what the owner of the field required.
Jesus story however does not tell the story of harvesters who worked hard for the landowner, but of tenants who did the opposite of respecting the landowner. These tenants thought the vineyard had become theirs, they did not want to share the harvest with the landowner, in fact they hurt the landowners' servants who come to collect the harvest and then kill the landowner's son, when he is sent.

This story is clearly allegorical, it is the second in a series of three judgement parables. In this story, God is the landowner, the tenant farmers are Israel's

religious leaders, Matthew's readers and Jesus' hearers may have initially understood that the vineyard itself to be Israel, as the language is similar to language found in Isaiah 5 where Israel is symbolized by a vineyard. But there is a little twist in Jesus' tale, we read in verse 43 that the vineyard is described as the Kingdom of God. Jesus says the Kingdom of God will be taken from those who have rejected his message and given to a people that produces its fruit. The word for "people" is often translated as nation or in the plural as in this case the Gentiles, but the people Jesus speaks of fits more with the idea of the new church, this group does not exclude the Jews, it is not exclusively the Gentiles, it is something new. Jesus is telling the religious leaders, that their stewardship of this Kingdom of God is coming to an end. The stewards will now be those who follow him. It is no wonder they wanted to kill him.

So, we understand this vineyard to belong to God. It is carefully prepared: The landowner plants it. He protects it with a wall. He provides everything necessary for it to flourish.

Then he entrusts it to others. All the tenants need has been provided; the big question is how will they respond? They have been given what they need, what will they do with it? Jesus doesn't ask the question, because he gets on to the answer quickly, but it is a good question to consider as we begin to look where we fit into the parable. What will they do with what they have been given?

We cannot help but ask, **what has God entrusted to us?**

Perhaps if we are not sure of the answer to that, we can assume that God has entrusted us with the gospel, the church, our families, our communities, our relationships, and God has entrusted us with one another. The same question applies, what will we do with what we have been given?

We sometimes forget that the church belongs to God.

We can begin to think: "This is **my** church." "These are **our** traditions." "These are **our** people." "This is the way **we** do things." We don't like these things to be messed with. But this vineyard never really belonged to the tenants, if that is what we are.

To follow the parable, It belonged to the landowner, it belonged to God.
The vineyard was the Lord's. The Church is the Lord's.

Today Christians around the world gather at the Lord's Table.
We remind ourselves every time we gather at this table that is the Lord's table, it is not LPC's table, it is not a Presbyterian table, it is the Lord's table. We say that every time.

But we kind of like how we do it right? Like many of our traditions, we are not too keen on changing it up, and I get it, familiarity is helpful, it gives us a sense of home. We like to hold onto our traditions.
World Communion Sunday is a great day to remember we are stewards of all of this. We are not owners; it is not ours. Today, communion will be served in many ways, today many kinds of bread coming to the table, different traditions, Different languages. Different cultures. Different worship styles. Different denominations. There is always room for more at this table.
Jesus's table offers a striking contrast to the tenants in Jesus' parable. They hold on to what has been entrusted to them as if it were theirs, and end up losing it all. At Jesus' table, bread is blessed, broken and given. The abundance of God is received and shared widely.
The vineyard belongs to the Lord.
The table belongs to the Lord.
Yesterday morning some of our LPC men gathered for breakfast and I read this scripture to them to see if I could glean some wisdom for the message today. Wisdom was there in an abundance. One of the men shared that the work is most productive when the barrier between employer and employee is thin, when they try to understand each other, to put themselves in each other's shoes, to understand each other's roles and work together.
That is exactly what God does in the incarnation. God became human in the form of Jesus, the fancy church word is incarnation, God understands the human condition, and that is also essentially what we try to do as followers

of Jesus. We try to become more Godly in our daily life. The fancy church word for that is sanctification, as we grow closer to being the people that God wants us to be.

Perhaps as we consider the question, with what has God entrusted us, and then "What will we do with what we have been given, perhaps the first thing is to think about how we become more like the one we follow. Because if we do that, we start to focus on loving others, showing grace to others, bringing justice to others, bringing peace to where it is needed, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless. As we focus our lives on the things of God and try to live into those things, we cannot help but move in those directions.

As we prepare to hear a little about stewardship this afternoon, at lunch, it is a good story for us to consider. The tenants in Jesus' story forgot they were stewards of what they had been given, they began to believe they were the owners, of what they had been given. Perhaps a good way for us to avoid such a trap is to consider the Incarnational ministry of Jesus. God, in Jesus became one of us. What if our stewardship became incarnational where we start to think of all we do as "being with". Our stewardship changes. We are not doing for someone; we are doing with someone. As we support the church that God has given us stewardship over, with our financial gifts or with our time or with our talent, when we consider our stewardship incarnationally, we realize that we support the church together, with each other. We do not act as stewards for someone, or something, we act as stewards with someone, with each other.

The vineyard is the Lords. Just as the church is the Lord's and this table is the Lords and we come together, with no hierarchy, as one, **with** each other.

Just as the Berries were a great leveler for those different folks who harvested, this table is also a great leveler.

At the Lord's Table, we come with different stories. Some come joyful. Some come grieving. Some come confident. Some come uncertain. Some come

with deep faith. Some come barely able to believe. But we come to the same table. And we receive the same grace.

No one comes because they are worthy. No one comes because they have earned a place. We come because Christ invites us. And when we receive the bread and cup, we remember.

The vineyard is the Lord's.

The church is the the Lord's.

This table is the Lord's.

So may we allow ourselves to imagine a church, where we steward that which God has given us together. It does not mean we will work in the same areas, or ministries, it does not mean that we will not have seasons when we can do less allow others to carry us, it does not mean we will agree on everything, but it means we practice, "being with," each other. We can disagree together, we can work in different ministries together, we can support those who need it together. And we do it with our eyes on Jesus, the cornerstone of all of this.

Let us serve the Lord by looking at what has been entrusted to us and then be like the berry pickers who got their hands dirty working together, to bring the Kingdom of God to those we serve and live with. Amen.