

The vineyard parable in our gospel reading has caused many Christians to run amuck over the years. We pretty easily get the interpretation that the vineyard owner is God, the tenants are the Jewish leaders, and the messengers sent to collect the produce of the vineyard are the prophets. The son who is killed is Jesus himself.

Where Christians have gone amuck is that they have interpreted this to mean that God has rejected the Jewish people and replaced them with the church. All sorts of anti-Jewish things have been done by Christians over the centuries with parables like this one as the justification. Doing that is a mistake, however. Not only is it a violation of the command to love that Jesus gives, it is also not in line with scripture itself. In Paul's letter to the Romans we find similar thoughts, but much more developed. Paul says that yes, indeed God has cut away Jewish branches from the tree, and grafted the Church into their place. But, Christians should not become arrogant about this. There is no superiority to be had by being grafted in. If God cut away the Jewish branches and grafted in

others, God can also cut away Christian branches and graft in others.

Other places in Romans Paul talks about God's continued love and care for the Jewish people. It is not that the Jews are out and the Christians are in. Rather, God has plans that are bigger and wider than the limits any specific set of religious beliefs may cause. Therefore, be in awe of God's grace and mercy, and rejoice to be a part in it. There is no place for arrogance in faith.

The question that comes up for us is, what is the nature of our faith? What are the things going on in the parable that caused God to cast them out in the first place, and do we do the same activities?

We could say, "Of course not! I don't kill or steal. I know the world isn't perfect but I try not to exploit people. I haven't acted like the people in the parable." And that would certainly be true; at least at a literal level. But let's also look more deeply.

The tenants of the vineyard were not using the vineyard as God intended it, and they were removed from it. Do we live using faith as God intends it, or do we not. Perhaps we won't be chucked out, but nevertheless we will fail to receive its benefits.

Rebecca Truland is a young woman currently studying to become a Lutheran pastor. Before going on internship all students have to write what we call an Endorsement Essay showing what they have learned so far and what they hope to learn on internship. The essays are confidential but Rebecca has given me permission to share a couple excerpts from hers that I think are pertinent to this. She writes, "[We need to] question parts of our dominant culture that harm our relationships with God and with one another... How does our culture's emphasis on achievement and productivity prevent us from fulfilling God's will for us to rest and be whole?" (Truland, Endorsement Essay, Pg. 2)

You may remember me preaching before, that I believe many people see faith and the church as a good thing that they should

be involved in as part of a well-balanced life. But if, as Rebecca suggests, we've allowed culture's emphasis on achievement and productivity become core, then faith becomes just one more piece of productivity. Ultimately, when faith doesn't lead to ongoing productivity it starts to slip and is dropped.

God didn't give us faith so that we could be well rounded people. God gave us faith so that we could build our entire lives upon it.

Again a quote from Rebecca, "Baptism is all too often understood as an insurance policy, a golden ticket into heaven upon our earthly death, but this point of view has always left me wondering about how baptism affect my here and now. I'm still subject to sin, yet I am a called and claimed child of God, a righteous saint who feels led to be a public leader of faith. Martin Luther wrote that, 'This blessed sacrament of baptism helps you because God allies himself with you and becomes one with you in a gracious covenant of comfort.' Baptism is the beginning of a passionate relationship between God and

the baptized in which God will be a constant presence of fortitude, love, and grace.

“It is because of this belief, that God has been intimately bonded with me in my baptism, that I feel the freedom and the courage to pursue all of my vocations - my call to public ministry in particular, but also my calls to be a daughter, a sister, a friend, a student... In addition to binding me to God, my baptism also binds me to the rest of the Body of Christ, and in my vocations I have sought to serve these sisters and brothers to the best of my ability, and always with the help of God.” (Truland, Endorsement Essay, Pg. 1)

Or in my words, is faith something we do as part of a routine, or is it a guiding part of life? If it is part of a routine, then you will not be included in the vineyard. That's not a punishment, it's just reality. But if it is a guiding part of life, a building part, then you will receive the benefits of it.

In my opinion I see our world running faster and faster every day, but going nowhere. Evangelism has never been easy work, and each generation brings new challenges. These days I'm

sensing a hunger from people that they want to get out of the rat race of life. They feel like they are doing nothing but racing as fast as they can to their graves.

The bulletin board at the old entrance has the words, "Seeking the heart of God? We are too." This is because at the same time we live in a society that is skeptical of institutional religious beliefs, there is also a deep yearning for meaning. People are unsettled. They are searching. They may not be conscious of it, but they are. They are looking to find the produce of the vineyard.

I think that gives us a need for evangelism. We don't have to be embarrassed about our faith. We don't have fear that people will think we are weirdos or emotional weaklings that need faith as a crutch to get through life. We can share that we have found value, wholeness, worthwhileness. Maybe we don't have all the answers, but they can join us in the seeking. Because ultimately seeking the heart of God is not a search that people go on. Seeking the heart of God is God's own work nudging people to realize they are missing something, that they need something.

It is God's desire for all people to know fullness in him.
Let us build our lives around that so that we can help others do
the same. Amen