**Weekend of Sunday, October 8, 2023**

**19th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 27/Year A**

**First Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7**

**Second Reading: Philippians 3:4b-14**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 21:33-46**

**Sermon Title: *“Cultivating Fruitful Lives: Tending God’s Vineyard with Diligence”***

**Theme**

*In today’s gospel reading, Jesus tells a vineyard parable, which serves as an image of Israel, the prophets’ mission, and Christ’s death. For Christians, the vineyard also speaks of God’s love poured out in the blood of Christ, given to us for the forgiveness of sin. Grafted onto Christ the vine at baptism, we are nourished with wine and bread so that we may share Christ’s sufferings and know the power of his resurrection.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7**

1Let me sing for my beloved  
  my love-song concerning his vineyard:  
 My beloved had a vineyard  
  on a very fertile hill.  
 2He dug it and cleared it of stones,  
  and planted it with choice vines;  
 he built a watchtower in the midst of it,  
  and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
 he expected it to yield grapes,  
  but it yielded wild grapes.  
  
 3And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem  
  and people of Judah,  
 judge between me  
  and my vineyard.  
 4What more was there to do for my vineyard  
  that I have not done in it?  
 When I expected it to yield grapes,  
  why did it yield wild grapes?  
  
 5And now I will tell you  
  what I will do to my vineyard.  
 I will remove its hedge,  
  and it shall be devoured;  
 I will break down its wall,  
  and it shall be trampled down.  
 6I will make it a waste;  
  it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
  and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns;  
 I will also command the clouds  
  that they rain no rain upon it.  
  
 7For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts  
  is the house of Israel,  
 and the people of Judah  
  are his pleasant planting;  
 he expected justice,  
  but saw bloodshed;  
 righteousness,  
  but heard a cry!

**Second Reading: Philippians 3:4b-14**

[Paul writes:] 4bIf anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.  
 7Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.  
 12Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

**Gospel: Matthew 21:33-46**

[Jesus said to the people:] 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.

**Sermon**

Welcome to week two of our three-week 2024 annual stewardship campaign that I have entitled, "Where Your Heart Is." Before we delve into the parables and teachings prescribed for the day and read for you a moment ago, let us listen again to the text that is the inspiration for this campaign, Matthew 6:19-21. Jesus said,

19"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This week, I would like to continue that same teaching with what Jesus said next:

22"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; 23but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"

These words of Jesus are likely to be confusing to us without explanation, and that is because this teaching is grounded in cultural idioms that have not been passed along to us. We need to dig a bit deeper to better understand what Jesus is saying.

In the first century, it was thought that the eyes were the doorway to the soul. You can relate to this. When you think someone is trying to lie to you or do you harm, you might say, “Look me in the eye and tell me that.” Or if your spouse is feeling particularly amorous toward you, you might respond, “I see that look in your eyes!” So at some level, we can agree, a lot can be learned by looking into the eyes of another.

Referring to those words of Jesus, in ancient Israel, the idea of having *eyes that are healthy* was a reference to someone who was generous. A generous person was said to be *full of light*. It was as if they radiated light!

We can imagine a person in some desperate need seeking out someone who has the resources to help and that person helps the needy person with generosity and grace. In the first century, it might have been said that that person had eyes that were healthy and a body full of light.

On the other hand, we can imagine a person in some desperate need seeking out someone who has the resources to help and that person rejects the person and makes them feel worse about their situation. In the first century, it might have been said that that person had eyes that were unhealthy and a body full of darkness.

So in this teaching of Jesus, our eyes determine the light or darkness within us. Today as we reflect upon the precious gift of time and how we are called to be good stewards of it, we should ask ourselves, “What is the state of our eyes?”

If our eyes, as Jesus would say, are focused on the eternal treasure of the Kingdom of Heaven, our perspective on time will be transformed, and our days will be filled with the light of God's purposes.

Using this first-century idiom, what do people see when they look into our eyes? Do they see a selfish person only out to please themselves? Or do they see a generous person who follows the example of Jesus and uses their time to do ministry that advances the Kingdom of God?

All the congregations that I have been associated with have done great ministry serving the communities where they are located. And Zion is no exception. Our Food Distribution, VITA, ZCELC, Live Nativity, Nooners, GWOHDoS, Red Cross Blood Drawings, Changing Hearts, and Live Streaming are just a few ministries that we do regularly to provide services to our community that I think Jesus would be proud of. I hope you are proud of your congregation for providing these ministries.

But on this second week of the 2024 Annual Stewardship campaign, I want you to think about your participation in these and other ministries we do here at Zion. There may be some exceptions, but I believe there is a place for you – YOU – in this ministry. There are labor-intensive jobs, there are financial jobs, there are leadership jobs, and teaching jobs, just to name a few. Let me, or anyone on Council, know what you would like to help with.

From my experience, and the experience of many of our volunteers around here, we are never more satisfied than when we serve the LORD through the many ways we are offered.

Now, let us turn to the book of Isaiah and explore the parable of the vineyard. The prophet describes a vineyard that was carefully planted and cultivated by its owner, symbolizing God's blessings upon His people. Yet, despite God's care, the vineyard yielded wild grapes, signifying disobedience and unfaithfulness.

This parable reminds us that time is a gift from God, much like the vineyard, and He expects us to use it wisely and bear good fruit. When our hearts are aligned with God's will, our use of time will reflect His grace, bearing the fruit of love, service, and righteousness. Are we using our time as faithful stewards of God's vineyard, or are we allowing it to be overrun by the wild grapes of worldly distractions and selfish pursuits?

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, shares his transformation and priorities when he encountered Christ. He once considered his accomplishments and status as treasures, but after meeting Jesus, he declared that knowing Christ was the ultimate treasure.

Our use of time is intimately connected to our pursuit of Christ. When our hearts are fixed on Him, we find meaning and purpose in every moment. Time becomes a tool for growing in our relationship with Jesus and serving others in His name.

Paul's testimony challenges us to consider what we treasure most. Is it the accumulation of earthly achievements, or is it the eternal treasure of knowing and walking with Christ?

Finally, let us return to the Gospel of Matthew and explore the Parable of the Tenants. In this story, a landowner planted a vineyard and rented it to tenants. When he sent servants to collect the harvest, the tenants mistreated and killed them. The landowner eventually sent his own son, whom the tenants also killed.

This parable illustrates God's patient pursuit of His people throughout history, as well as the rejection of His messengers, culminating in the crucifixion of His Son, Jesus Christ. It teaches us about the consequences of misusing the time and opportunities God grants us.

Are we making the most of the time God has entrusted to us, bearing fruit for His kingdom, or are we wasting it on selfish pursuits and neglecting our responsibilities as stewards?

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Let us remember that according to Jesus, our eyes reveal the condition of our being – are we healthy and full of light advancing the Kingdom of God where we are? Or are we unhealthy and full of darkness distracted by too many selfish personal interests, stifling the Kingdom of God where we are?

The answer to that question can be resolved by the good stewardship of our time. For where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also, including the treasure of our time.

May we heed the lessons from the parable of the vineyard, recognizing that time is a gift from God meant to bear good fruit when used in His service.

Let us embrace the challenge of the Apostle Paul to treasure knowing Christ above all else, allowing Him to transform our use of time.

Finally, let us be mindful of the consequences illustrated in the Parable of the Tenants—time misused and opportunities neglected can lead to spiritual barrenness and separation from God. And I think one day, when we come face to face with God revealed in Jesus Christ, we are going to regret all the time that we spent doing some of the silly things we’ve done, when we could have come to know him better.

**Prayer**

All providing God, may our hearts be fixed on heavenly treasures, and may our use of time be a testimony to our love for Christ and our commitment to steward His gifts faithfully. In the name of Jesus, our true treasure, we pray. Amen.

Now, that sermon is concluded. I want to speak to you for a moment about legacy giving, remembering your congregation in your will and estate. This last year we had two legacy gifts given to the church. One was by Donna Fulks, a faithful member of this congregation for many years. When she passed, she left the congregation $25,000. Jeanie Price might be more familiar to you. She was here more often until she went to nursing care. She lived a modest life but left her congregation $3000. While we miss the presence of these two beloved members of our fellowship, because of their legacy gifts, their presence will be known in perpetuity.

A couple of years ago I challenged each member to consider including Zion in our estates. I want to reiterate that now. We’ve already done 17 funerals since last All Saints Day. If each decedent would have left *just* $1000, our endowment fund would have grown by $17,000.

Let me remind you that this local congregation is Christ’s gift to us. It's not too much to ask you to honor its contribution to your life when you pass so that it may continue to serve and be a place for service for generations to come.

Now this week we will be sending out our campaign conclusion letter that will include your 2024 commitment card. I ask you to pray about your commitment as a family, fill out the card, and get it back to us as soon as you can so we can begin the budgeting process. And start contributing at that new rate.