

**“Deaf Ears” – Luke 20:9-20**  
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I get a kick out of shows that talk about “dumb criminals.” Usually these are stories about people who commit crimes for rather unusual or illogical reasons, or do something ridiculous in committing a crime. A good example is something that made local and national headlines and happened in McConnellsburg, PA. A 33 year old woman from McConnellsburg was arrested after she confessed to poisoning her live in boyfriend. The boyfriend’s doctor had been treating him for several years for nausea, vomiting, blood pressure problems, and breathing issues when the doctor decided to finally run some blood tests which revealed that the main ingredient for eye drops was in his bloodstream. It turned out the girlfriend had been put eye drops into his drinking water over a 3 year period. When asked why she did this, she said she didn’t intend for him to die or get extremely sick, she just wanted him to pay more attention to her. Her attempt at getting some more attention from her boyfriend ended up getting her 4 years in prison.

In today’s Gospel reading, we have a parable that basically falls into a similar category. Yet in this parable, Jesus has a very important warning to speak to us today, but also some great blessings.

In today’s parable, there is a man who plants a vineyard, and then leases it out to some tenants while he goes away to another country and plans to be gone for a long time. Right off the bat, we’re told what the arrangement is: the man who planted the vineyard is the owner, it’s his vineyard, even though he has gone away. The tenants are the ones who will care for it and harvest the fruit when it’s ready, and in return, the owner expects to get whatever part of the fruit was in the lease. So when the time comes, the owner sends one of his servants to the vineyard, and what does he expect? He expects to have the servant bring back some fruit, right? But what happens? “But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed.” In some cases, if a tenant were to do that, we’d expect the owner of the vineyard to kick the tenants out. Yet, we see the patience of the owner, as we’re told he sent out a 2nd servant, who was treated “shamefully.” They added insult to injury. Then a 3rd servant is sent, and this one is wounded and cast out. In each case, the owner of the vineyard is giving the tenants another chance, and instead of paying the owner what is due, the violence in which they treat the servant, showing their contempt toward the owner, increases.

So finally, the owner decides “I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.” You could say it’s a final attempt to win over those tenants. And what do they do? This is where we see how if such programs existed in Jesus’ day, you’d likely see them on that “dumbest criminals” program. The tenants recognize that it’s the owner’s son and they say “This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.” And that’s exactly what they do, they drive the son out of the vineyard, and kill him. And the reason? “If we kill the son, we get to keep the vineyard for ourselves!”

Think about this for a moment. They actually believe this! They aren't thinking "Oh, wait a minute; if we kill the son, the owner is probably going to come after us with a vengeance. We've already beaten three of his servants, so we're in enough trouble as it is, we'd better not do this." They aren't thinking about what might happen to them if they actually kill the son. Sin has so warped their thinking that they truly believe if they kill the Son, then the owner has no choice but to give them the vineyard. That things will be the way that they want them to be. That they won't have to give the owner what's properly his.

It's at this point that Jesus asks the rhetorical question: "What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." In other words, the owner has finally had it. The tenants were graciously given time after each servant was sent away empty-handed to repent and give him what was properly his, so they can remain in the vineyard and keep the blessings that go along with it.

Yet, they have forgotten one important part: the vineyard isn't theirs. It never was. They were merely entrusted to it for a time and were to hand over to the owner what was already his. And in each case, they failed. And in killing the Son, they show their complete disregard for the owner, truly believing "if we kill the Son, we get to keep the vineyard!" But of course, what is the reality? The wicked tenants will be destroyed and the vineyard let out to other tenants who will live by the covenant that is the lease.

Now the key to really understanding this "dumb criminal" parable is this: Jesus isn't telling this parable to teach us about landlord/tenant relationships. He's talking about the chief priests, elders, and scribes, the religious leaders of the Jews. In the parable, God is of course the owner of the vineyard, the vineyard itself is the people of Israel, that is, God's people, and the wicked tenants represent these Jewish leaders. Over the centuries, they have rejected the prophets that God has sent to warn them of their wicked ways, in leading the people into various sins and to turn away from the one true God who had promised to save them from sin, death, the power of the devil in the coming Messiah. Some of those prophets were treated very poorly. So finally, God sends His Son. The Messiah, the Savior. The One who they have been told is coming is here, and the religious leaders are rejecting him. They don't want to hear what Jesus has to say because he's threatening their nice little system of works that they have going. It's clear by the time we get to this point in Luke's Gospel that they've already rejected Jesus, which is why he quotes this prophecy from the 118th Psalm to them when they want to deny that this is going to happen: "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."

What Jesus is saying is this: the Kingdom of God does not belong to the so called "religious elite." It belongs to the Father. And the people will find their true life and salvation through Him. Indeed, many will reject Him, including those who claim to speak for God himself, yet in the end, God's people, His vineyard; will have Jesus Christ as its cornerstone. His life, death, and resurrection are what the church will be built upon, not

on the opinions of man, not on any one human being, but on the one who will soon be rejected and killed.

It doesn't make a lot of sense to those who refuse to listen to Jesus' words, and the words of Scripture. It won't make any sense to people who put their trust in religious duty, or their elite status among the establishment of the day. In fact, the possibility of such a judgment coming upon them as Jesus describes in the parable angers them to the point that by the time we get to the end of the text, the scribes and chief priests are ready to get rid of Jesus right then and there "because they perceived that he had told this parable against them." In the end, they truly believe that they can kill the son, and yet, keep the vineyard.

So for us today, there are people in the world out there who also want to do the same thing, in that they sincerely believe they can stay in the vineyard, and kick Jesus out of it. They want to teach that Jesus is just one of many ways to heaven, rejecting His own Words of "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to father except through me" (John 14:6). Others teach that it really doesn't matter what you believe, that everyone is in the vineyard, that is, heaven anyway as long as they do enough good things. But in the end, in rejecting the Son of God, what else are they rejecting? They are rejecting the life and salvation that Christ has lived, died, and risen again to bring.

But for you and me, this parable brings good news. There's good news in it because God does not leave us without workers who will faithfully tend to the vineyard. He sends us faithful Pastors, teachers, church workers, Sunday School leaders, and others who always point us back to Christ in the Word, in the Sacraments, and in our daily interactions with them. And that's so vitally important because the One that so many in our world want to reject, is in fact, the cornerstone of the Christian faith. And this is very important at so many stages of life.

Each time we worship, we learn what a comfort God's Word of absolution is, in hearing that there is no sin too great that the blood of Christ does not cover. That means that all of those mistakes from your past, those things that keep you up at night, wondering if anyone can ever forgive you for, are as far as the East is from the West. And it's not because you did enough good to erase them on your own, it's because Jesus has already paid the price for them.

But there are other times where those promises of salvation and eternal life are of great comfort for us. When we or a loved one are sick or suffering, it's easy to doubt that God is with us. And yet, we hear of a Savior in Jesus who knows suffering, because He allowed Himself to be stripped of his health, even His own life, so that you may have eternal life with Him. He has shown His power over sickness through His miracles, and we live lives knowing He has power to heal us, whether that comes in this life, or in bringing us out of this life to eternal life where there will not be suffering or pain ever again. And knowing that can bring us great joy even in the face of uncertainty, suffering, or sorrow.

Even in the face of death, we live with hope, for ourselves or our loved ones who are

dying, because Christ is our cornerstone. As St. Paul writes in today's first reading – **Read Phil. 3:8-11**. Paul wrote those words in a prison cell, knowing that death awaited him. Yet later in this letter, He is able to encourage us to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4:4), because Paul already knows the end of the story. He knows that no matter what he suffers in this life, there is a day coming where he will die to life in a decaying, dying world and rise again to a new life where none of these things will ever be known again. And for us, even in the face of death, because we know that Jesus Christ is our cornerstone, we have hope even in the worst of circumstances because we know this isn't the end. We know that because of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and what He has done for us, we won't find ourselves kicked out of the vineyard, but we will find ourselves as heirs of eternal life with Christ, a life where there is never suffering, sorrow, or need; life the way God always intended it to be.

Yes, those who reject the Son, who want to try to find salvation apart from Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of our faith, will be the “dumb criminals” in our parable, in that they will be left with nothing and will not get to keep the vineyard for themselves. However, today/this morning, as we enter the home stretch of our Lenten journey, we give thanks that God sent His Son into his vineyard, and that the one who will be rejected, scorned, and killed, will rise again to become our life and salvation. May we live in that joy, and be ever willing to share that with others in our lives so that on the last day, they too will be in the vineyard with the Son, for Jesus' sake. Amen.