

*Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 2.x.2005, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Chanceford Twp., York Co., Pennsylvania
Holy Communion Liturgy, WOV Setting 5
Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-14; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46*

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace, from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

*“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard
as loss because of Christ. More 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 and 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 of God based on faith.”
– Philippians 3:7-9*



No one, no people or nation and also no religious
community is entitled to call itself the People of God, the heirs
of God’s Covenant, except by faith working through love. That
is the stern message of today’s First Reading from the scroll of

the historic Prophet Isaiah, of the Psalmist and of Our Lord Jesus Christ in today's Gospel. Isaiah warns a complacent King of Judah and his court that, if his people's worship is not pure and if that worship does not lead to justice and mercy of a higher degree than among other peoples of the earth, the LORD of Israel will withdraw His protecting hand, both from the stage of history and the world of nature. On *Tish B'av*, the day of the fall of Jerusalem before the invading armies of Babylon, this prophecy came to pass, a horrific destruction following a terrible siege.

The Psalmist of the Exile into Babylon accepts that judgment, but beseeches God to be merciful, to create a new day in Israel. The Psalmist appeals to God's pity, asking the LORD to remember His Covenant with the people He brought out of slavery in Egypt, comparing Israel to a young grapevine transplanted from Egypt to the Land of Promise in Canaan.

In today's Gospel, it is the LORD's Vineyard, Israel, that is the scene of the Parable of the Faithful Servants and the Evil Tenants. The Tenants have forgotten to whom the Vineyard belongs, thinking in their greed that they can simply seize it for themselves, keeping also the fruit and the profit from the Vineyard for themselves. Their thievery turns to violence and finally to murder as they flog the servants of the LORD of the Vineyard and kill the LORD's own Son. In Jesus' telling and explanation of the parable, the LORD *His* sovereign ownership of the Vineyard clear, punishing those thieves and murderers and giving the vineyard to others. Even the *Temple* is not so indispensable to the Living God that He will not hesitate to destroy it—as had already happened *twice* in history by Jesus' day—if the worship and teaching it stands for does not produce 'fruits of the Kingdom,' justice and mercy, just as Isaiah had warned so long ago.

There are two good reasons for Matthew's Community to have told and retold this parable and the reaction of the Jerusalem leaders to Jesus' explanation of it. The first was to help them to understand why they had been excluded from the greater body of Jewish believers, why it was increasingly difficult for them to worship in the Synagogues and to pray with their Jewish family and friends who did not accept Jesus as Messiah. The other reason is that Jesus warning and rebuke in this parable applied also to the Matthean Christians, just as it can apply also to *us*. Neither they nor *we* can claim the *right* to be the community, the assembly the Church of Jesus Christ, for we have no right to that name. Neither the antiquity or tradition of the Church nor of a single congregation can earn that right, but rather God's grace alone, active in a living faith that loves others as Christ loves us. *That* is the foundation on which the Church is built and *that* alone is the foundation from which the Church, and *this* church may not shift and still belong to Christ.

But, we like to hold on to what we think we possess by right. The Chief Priests and Pharisees described in today's Gospel are no more guilty of that than we. How *dare* He talk to them—to *us*—as though they—and *we*—were dispensable. In point of fact, we *are*, and we pass away, as the Psalmist says, 'like a sigh.' What remains of us *here*, more than any memorial gifts with our names stamped or stitched on them, are the fruits of faithful love that those the day after tomorrow will only recognize as God's gift, an atmosphere of mercy and reconciliation that bears neither the name 'Marilyn' nor 'Ruth' but that of Jesus Christ alone.

That, I think, is what Saint Paul the Apostle means when he talks about gain and loss. Whatever he had or thought he had, whether the blessings of this life, intelligence, a fervent heart, a pious upbringing in Israel, *all* of it was nothing for Paul compared to knowing Christ, being accepted and baptized in the

Church which he, Saul, had persecuted, and being *declared* forgiven and righteous for Jesus' sake.

Paul actually talks about loss, 'the loss of all things,' as a blessing. There is, of course, the loss of those things that do not belong to us rightfully in the first place, e.g., the Vineyard in the parable in today's Gospel, or the superficial righteousness of Jesus' opponents, the loss of illusions—and *good riddance!* But, there is also the loss of those persons to whom *we* have belonged with all our hearts, those without whom we would not be the persons we are today. Now is a difficult time for most of us here to think of loss, especially *that* kind of loss, as a blessing. I am praying for at least a pause in the loss that seems to have been incessant in both of my families, the Carters and this Congregation, in our nation and in our world, since the first of this year, right up to the present hour! Enough loss already, LORD!!!

But Paul calls us to look at what and Who is left after we have experienced loss of any kind, and to see what and Who is still standing after everything has fallen down around our ears. The Apostle especially calls us to the grace God *gives* us the instant we stop trying to claim to be righteous because of what we do or don't do, because of who we or our forebears were or weren't. The Holy Spirit calls us to the present and the future which belong to Our Heavenly Father. There, after *all* has been lost, stands 'Christ, the righteousness of God based on faith,' in whom we are called to new life. ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to our God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

S. D. G.!