

Lent 5 – C
Luke 20:9-19
The Lord’s Urgent Warning

Most of us are familiar with product warning labels. Here are some actual warning labels that are rather humorous:

1. “Warning. Jumping into toxic waste does not give you super powers. My cause adverse health effects. (See fig 1A)”
2. The tag on an iron says: “Warning—Never iron clothes on body.”
3. “Warning—ventilation hazard. Do not inhale marbles.”
4. Nabisco Easy Spread Cheese announces on its label: “For best results: Remove cap.”
5. A warning label on Superman pajamas reads: “Warning—Wearing of this garment does not enable you to fly.”
6. “Danger—Do not hold wrong end of chainsaw.”

A warning label is designed to protect us from harm. If there was a warning label attached to this passage of scripture, it would read: “Warning: If you reject God’s son you will receive God’s judgment.” This morning as we read and apply the Parable of the Tenants, may the Holy Spirit move us to very seriously heed the Lord’s urgent warning.

I. Not to despise his Word (9-12)

The tension was so thick that you could cut it with a knife. It was Tuesday, a couple of days after Jesus’ triumphant ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It was Tuesday, a couple of days before Jesus’ midnight arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. We know how the story ended up with Good Friday and Easter Sunday, but on Tuesday no one really was sure of how the week was going to turn out. It was almost like watching the closing minutes of a college basketball game that was going down to the wire. Jesus and his enemies were trading baskets, and it seemed like the last team to score would win the game. And on Tuesday, Jesus was ahead. He had taken a comfortable lead in the polls on Palm Sunday, as he garnered the public’s support and approval. And he was doing pretty well on Tuesday also. Jesus was answering and defeating all the attacks and traps that his enemies were setting for him. Jesus had the people on his side so strongly that over and over again the Gospels tell about how the chief priests and the elders were afraid of the people. Our text ends with these words, *“they were afraid of the people.”* The tension was so thick, the outcome still in doubt, that one wrong move and it could have been the chief priests who were the ones being put to death by an angry mob. No one was really sure which side would win, well, except Jesus of course. And this parable that he tells in the hearing of his enemies lets everyone know exactly how this struggle was going to turn out. With that background, this becomes a very easy parable to explain.

“A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time” (9). Jesus first mentions the Lord, his heavenly Father, who is the owner. The vineyard is the Old Testament Church, and the farmers that were going to work in that vineyard were the Israelite church leaders, the priests, elders, and teachers of the Law. With that stage set, Jesus goes on with the story, *“at harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard”* (10). So far, so good. Everything is working according to the plan. The landlord expects to be paid by the tenants. The farmers don’t own the land, and so they owe this rent in the form of crops back to the landlord.

“But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed” (10). Obviously, we have a problem. We’ve got some unruly farmers here, farmers who don’t even own the land they work. And yet they are acting as though the vineyard belongs to them and the landlord is the unfair one. Some of you pay rent to a landlord each month for an apartment or house. Can you imagine your landlord coming to your door, asking for payment, and telling him, “Get out of here!” and become violent with him? I’m guessing that your landlord would start legal proceedings to get you evicted, not just because you were harsh and violent, but because you

didn't give him what you owed him. And he definitely wouldn't be knocking on your door a month later with another "friendly" reminder.

Look at the unbelievable patience of our Lord, the Landlord! After his first servant is roughed up: "*He sent another servant, but that one they beat and treated shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out*" (11). No way would this ever happen in real life, that an owner show that much tolerance to treacherous tenants. And that's exactly the point that Jesus is trying to make in this parable. The Lord has an incredible amount of patience for sinners, far more than sinners deserve. But with each successive servant sent, the tenants become more and more hardened in their hatred. In the parable, the owner shows great patience in sending servant after servant, but this only confirmed the tenants in their wickedness. They got more and more annoyed, and progressively more violent as servant after servant was sent to them. The Greek word for "beat" in verse 11 means "to tear the skin off." Are you beginning to see a pattern here? Every time the landowner sends someone to collect the rent, they beat his servants and then send the man away empty handed. Three times this happens. We might characterize this group of people as unreasonable or stupid. After all, what did they think was going to happen to them for their cruelty? We have a good picture of the type of people that had now, for all practical purposes, taken over the vineyard by force. They didn't want to take care of the vineyard. They wanted to take charge of it. They wanted to run it for themselves, for their own benefit.

This is not just some make-believe story Jesus is telling here. This is real history—the real history of a nation called Israel. This landowner is the Lord God himself and his vineyard is his Kingdom of Grace, the family we call each Sunday the Holy Christian Church. He chose the children of Israel to belong to that family. He loved them, protected them, and provided for them like nobody else ever could. To them this God gave all the blessings of his saving Word, especially that blessing of a promised Savior. The Lord God expected some fruit from these people, but he was very disappointed. He sent many prophets to them to call them back to his side—men like Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Often those prophets of the Lord were mistreated. Sometimes they were killed in horrible ways. Most of them were held in contempt.

What is our Jesus saying to you and me? My fellow Christians, this parable will not do us any good if we see it only as the history of one nation called Israel. This parable is more than a story about a particular people living at a particular time who behaved in a particular way. Today it is you and me to whom our God has entrusted his vineyard. Today it is you and me from whom our God expects those grapes we call a dedicated Christian life which reflects our faith in Jesus Christ. Today it is you and me to whom our God still patiently sends his servants—our pastors, our Sunday School teachers, our elders, our parents, and anyone else who brings us messages from the Bible.

How do you treat the Landlord when he comes looking to collect fruit from you? The basic sin of the tenants was that they refused to give God his fruits, and we do the same thing. God has a right to expect the best from us. Like the tenants, we don't really own anything, not our jobs, not our houses, not even our bodies. We don't even own our time. All these things God our Landlord rents out to us for one primary purpose: to use to his glory, his benefit. But like those self-seeking tenants, we oftentimes act as though this is our stuff, we own it, "and Lord, I'll get you your share when I'm good and ready." If you ever had a landlord here on earth, you know you couldn't get away with paying him only a fraction of what you owe him. So why do we act as though we can skimp on our Lord and expect him to be fine with it? We cheat God when he asks us for our time, as we tell him we're too busy right now, we don't have time to pray, to read the Word, to serve other people. We cheat our Lord when we tell him that the talents that he's given us aren't the ones that really build up the church... that job is best left to others more skilled in that area. We cheat the Landlord when we bring meager portions of our income to him, and promptly go home after church to read the Sunday paper advertisements and find all the cool things we can spend our money on.

Have you and I ever been like those renters here in Jesus' parable? Are we ever among those who have mistreated or disrespected God's servants, our Christian pastors or parents by giving them a hard time and not listening to everything they bring us from God's Word? Remember, the Old Testament Jews had the greatest privileges one can enjoy from God. They had God's prophets, they had the Bible, and they had the one true Lord God. But instead of thanking the Lord for these things, they took them for granted. But we are now where they were—no, our blessings are more than theirs. They had symbols of the coming Savior, we have the

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real thing. The blessings of the Promised Land are nowhere near the blessings of America. The kingdom of God is not just near us, churches are accessible from nearly anywhere. For many of us, even from our early years we have known about the old, old story of Jesus and his love, and Christ has been proclaimed to us in sermons and sung to us in songs, and commended to us in meditations and books. What more could God do for us? We have touched the high-water mark of privilege; and there is not a sinner in the land that may not hear, if he chooses, of God's salvation. There is certainly an urgent warning from the Lord not to repeat history and despise his Word by in any way giving the impression that God's spiritual blessings are not all that important.

We are renters who have acted like the owners. But what a patient Lord we live under! He sends us servant after servant to tell us of our wrongs, servants like pastors, elders, and other concerned Christians. God sends servants to you because he wishes to lead you to repentance.

II. Not to reject his love (13-15)

In spite of the tremendous cruelty of the tenants, the landowner still does not turn his back on them. Listen to what happens in verse 13, "*Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my son, who I love; perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him*" (13-15). "How could anyone be so foolish to think that he could get away with such a crime?" we ask. Could these tenants really have supposed that the owner would do nothing to them? They had mistreated the owner's servants in most shameful ways. Then they had even gone so far as to kill the owner's son and "heir." Jesus was standing before those who were plotting to do this very same thing. He could not have given his enemies a stronger warning. Yet the blind unbelief of these Jewish leaders led them to attempt this very crime against Jesus. But this is true of every unrepentant sinner who refuses to listen to God's servants. He or she is guilty of the death of God's own Son on account of his or her sins and yet somehow imagines that they can escape God's punishment. We can hope that if sin is done in darkness that God can't see it. We hope that God isn't that serious about our sins. We hope that maybe God will overlook our mistakes. "No way!" Jesus says. The farmers will be punished. The vineyard will be given to others.

What is striking here is that this patient heavenly father still doesn't turn his back on them. He sent his son... and what happened to him? Instead of receiving God's Son as their Savior, they brutally murdered him on a cross. Today it is you and me to whom God sends his Son again and again in the Bible and the Sacraments we call Baptism and Holy Communion. Have we ever done to God's Son what these renters did to him? Hurting him or throwing him out of our lives by neglecting to come to his house, or loving other things more than him? Have we always used our lips and hands to honor him? Or have those lips been used to hurt others? Or have those hands been used to do things that brought shame to Jesus' name? Take Jesus and his Word for granted, don't let it guide your every step anymore, and what happened to Israel will most certainly happen to you and me. Walk without Jesus, live without Jesus, keep Jesus out of the center of our lives and what happened to Israel will most certainly happen to every one of us as well.

III. Not to be crushed by his judgment (17-19)

Jesus brings the parable to a conclusion by asking his listeners: "*What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.*" When the people heard this, they said, "*May this never be!*" Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "*Then what is the meaning of that which is written: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone'?*" Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed" (15-18). Jesus now looked directly at his enemies and asked them to explain the meaning of Psalm 118:22. This psalm was a familiar one sung by the Jews at such joyous occasions as when a building was dedicated to God. Jesus applied this psalm to himself. He is "*the stone the builders rejected.*" The word "reject" means to discard something after it has failed to meet the test. Jesus failed to match the idea of the Messiah which the unbelieving teachers of the law and chief priests had in mind. They rejected him. But Jesus "*has become the capstone,*" or cornerstone. This was the

first stone that was laid in a new building. The other stones were lined up according to it. If the cornerstone was faulty, the whole building would be that way. If it was sound, the structure would be solid. Thus Jesus, rejected by the Jewish leaders, became the one who would give true direction to the church of the new covenant. At the same time this same stone would crush those who rejected it and would grind them to powder. This refers to Christ as the final judge. His judgment would be most severe. Jesus' words are a call to repentance to every person here today who calls himself and herself a follower of Christ!

One strong point Jesus makes is that there is nothing casual or cavalier about God's action. It is not done with a take-it-or-leave-it attitude. God is not to be regarded lightly. *"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked"* (Galatians 6:7). Although God's sending prophets and his son has our eternal purposes in mind, and although he has a love and patience beyond the farthest reaches of our imagination, the Bible still confronts us with the possibility that one can turn God down once too often. It reminds us, together with assurances of God's love, that *"our God is a consuming fire"* (Hebrews 12:29) and that *"it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (Hebrews 10:31). Our parable says it this way: *"Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed"* (18).

So that this never happens to our church and to any of us who belong to it, Jesus offers us the power to live our faith and let our light shine for him until our dying day. That power is found in this picture of our patient heavenly Father. The more we appreciate the patience of our heavenly Father, the less you and I will do to test it. One little verse holds out that picture to us all. That verse is, *"What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love"* (13).

What in all the world was that Father thinking about here? As parents, we seek to shield our children. We seek to protect them. We do everything in our power to keep them from harm. And yet here is a father sending his son into what was a very dangerous situation—a situation that ends up costing this landowner his son. Can you imagine if you read this story in the paper today some of the words that would be used to describe this father? Negligent? Irresponsible? Foolish? To risk your son's life, to cost your son's life, what kind of father is that?

What kind of Father foresees such danger for his son and sends him there anyway? What kind of Father would send his son to a place filled with people who would mock him and whip him and spit on him? What kind of Father would send his son, his only son whom he loves, to a place where he would be hung on a cross and pierced with a spear? What kind of Father? I'll tell you what kind... a patient father, full of love. A patient father who does not give up on us even though we give up on him all the time. A patient father who longs to forgive us and continually offers us time to repent. A patient father who, as I speak, is preparing our rooms for us in heaven so that we can spend eternity with him. What kind of father? Not a negligent one, not a foolish one, but a patient father who loves you and me very, very much. And that's a father who realized the only way we're ever going to see the inside of heaven is if he sent his son to die in our place. The very best father in the world—our patient, heavenly Father. Amen.