

Sermon – October 4, 2020  
“They Will Respect My Son”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Matthew 21:33-46

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen*

Good morning everyone! It is great to see you on this beautiful crisp fall day. Let's take just a minute to celebrate some of God's blessings that occurred on our Charge this past week. On Monday, a few men gathered and journeyed to Lottsburg to load a pickup truck with sweet potatoes and transport them to Warsaw to the Food Bank. What a blessing it was to be able to help provide for those in need out of a farmer's generosity and our hands to transport. The yard sale at Fairfields continues to raise money and I want to give a big thanks to those who are working there under the constraints of COVID-19. We held our Charge Conference Saturday evening and are ready to move into ministry in the coming year. I want to thank everyone who helped get our 2021 leadership in place and all who took time to get all actions completed that must be addressed for the coming year. Thank you for your expression of love and care for your pastor and Charge staff in the coming year, and thanks for your prayers and encouragement for the members of our congregations here on the Northumberland Charge. Please be in prayer for the mission of the churches in the coming year. Pray the coming year will be a time of planting, nurturing, and reaping in God's harvest.

Let me give just a bit of background this morning to place the scripture reading into context. Jesus is still talking to the religious leaders who have come to question his authority to “do these things”: clear the temple of commerce, teach in the temple, and heal those in need. They have come and demanded to know by what authority Jesus is doing such things and who gave him that authority. In the debate that has followed their demands, Jesus has silenced them but has continued to talk with them about their own authority and how they have misunderstood and are misusing what God placed in their hands. We learned from their debate that Jesus came

for those whom the religious authorities despised – tax collectors and prostitutes, sinners whom he will redeem and welcome into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is about to share with the religious authorities the most direct, but still veiled, statement of his authority and mission. In this parable, he answers their question in an indirect manner, but in a manner they will grasp.

Jesus invites the religious leaders into another parable with a simple request, “Listen to another parable.” In this parable, a landowner plants a vineyard, prepares it to produce fruit, and leaves tenants in charge to ensure that all that is planned occurs. When the time comes for fruit to be found in the vineyard, the landowner sends his servants to receive his portion. The tenants are not responsive to the landowner’s servants. They beat them, kill them, and do not share the fruit that is the landowner’s portion. The tenants reject the agreement they had made with the landowner and seek to keep the vineyard and its produce for themselves. Finally, the son of the landowner is sent. His sending is a change in the landowner’s approach to resolve the situation. The son is one who has authority to take legal action, one who should be respected, one who is now sent to the vineyard to deal with the tenants. The tenants recognize the son, do not respect him, but decide that they will kill him and possess the vineyard. We are reminded in their actions of Ahab and Jezebel of the Old Testament and how they killed the owner of a plot of land that Ahab wanted for a vegetable garden in order that Ahab might possess the rightful owner’s land. The son is taken outside of the vineyard and killed. Jesus then asks the religious authorities a question, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” and they reply, “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.” Once again, the religious authorities answer a question from Jesus that condemns them as evil tenants, but they are unaware. Jesus then quotes to them lines from Psalm 118, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.” This is one of those context moments that is difficult for us to capture from a reading of our translations, and as such, we are left wondering what Jesus has just said to the religious leaders that caused them to know he speaks of them in this parable. If we know that in Hebrew and Aramaic the words for son and stone sound the same, then we will understand that Jesus is saying stone, but it sounds like the word son. He is able, by quoting these verses from Psalm 118, to make the connection between their rejection of him as God’s son and his authority as being from God, but yet has not plainly stated that idea. He can make the claim with the word stone, but as he speaks it, they make the

connection to son. Jesus goes on to tell the religious leaders, “Therefore 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. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” Jesus again uses the word stone when he means son. In this parable, the vineyard is Israel, God’s chosen people. The landowner is God, the tenants are the religious leaders, and the fruit is the coming of people into the kingdom and receiving God’s blessing. The words of the religious leaders condemn them to God’s judgment of them because they recognized that the Son of God was present and seek to kill him so they can take possession of the things of God. Jesus is telling the religious authorities he is God’s Son, sent to them by God, and that they recognize him, reject him, will kill him, and will be judged for their actions. This is an open, yet veiled, statement about Jesus’ authority and the reason the Father sent him to Israel. He makes this statement knowing he will be killed for what it means. The religious authorities immediately realize what Jesus has told in the parable and they want to arrest him, but are prevented by the presence of the crowd, a presence they will eventually turn to their purposes.

We should not miss a key aspect of what Jesus states in his exchange with the religious authorities. Jesus has told them he is God’s Son and those who reject him will be judged. He also states that the vineyard, the kingdom of God, will be given to a people that will produce the fruits of the kingdom. We are challenged this morning to ask ourselves some questions: “Do we respect the Son? Are we a people of God? Are we those who are bearing fruit? Are we at work in the landowner’s vineyard, seeking to produce fruit, seeking to bring in the ripe harvest from the fields around us, right here, right now?” Notice Jesus does not tell the religious authorities what God will do with the evil tenants. Jesus leaves open that action with the potential for something new, something radical God will bring about through the death of the landowner’s son, redemption. There may be judgment for those who reject God’s purpose and seek to remove the heir and possess the vineyard, but God is at work to establish the kingdom of God. Jesus was sent by God for this purpose, to bring forth a new nation, a new people who are producing the fruits of this new kingdom. The tax collectors and prostitutes repented and will go into the kingdom of God before the religious authorities. They are among the first to be part of a new people who are to be a blessing to all of the nations. Our question is “Will we also respect the Son and be found among those who produce the fruits of the kingdom?”

This morning we are going to join with over two billion people who are seeking to produce the fruits of the kingdom. This is World Communion Sunday, the day when we seek to come together and celebrate Communion with Christ and with all of our sisters and brothers who believe in Jesus Christ. It is a time for us to realize there is a great multitude that is also seeking this day to respect, remember, and be filled anew with the presence of the Son through the Holy Spirit. Let us not be those who recognize the Son and seek to possess the land, but be those who respect the Son, are at work bringing forth fruit, and are working in the Lord's ripe harvest. Let us seek to be a people known as those who are about bringing others into the kingdom of God, a people seeking to see those who only Jesus sees, loving those who only Jesus loves, and living as those who are producing the fruits of the kingdom. Be mindful this morning of what is happening in the world as we also share Communion together and are connected to such a great cloud of witnesses through the spiritual presence of Jesus. Let us be filled with his presence and go out into the ripe harvest and share the Good News with all we meet.

*Pray with me: Father, we confess that we have not always been a people who respect the Son. Jesus, forgive us and wash us that we might be made clean and led into a new time of communion in your presence. Jesus, fill us with your love and guide us with the Holy Spirit to be your people, a people who are producing the fruits of the kingdom of God. Amen*