

Living into Discipleship

Pentecost 16A (Lectionary 27)

Text: Matthew 21:33–46

October 2, 2011

Bear Fruit or Get the Boot

*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.*

Two older women who relished telling everyone in the church about personal matters going on in the lives of other members cornered their pastor one Sunday after church.

They intended to take him to task for the sermon he preached that morning about the hurt and pain our sins not only cause us but the hurt and pain our sins cause others.

*Pastor, they said, when you were preaching against drinking and fighting and sex, you were really preaching—you were really letting them have it.
But when you started talking about gossip you crossed the line.
You went from preaching to meddling.*

There is always something discomfoting about words of judgment. When we hear the parables of Jesus and other passages of scripture that proclaim a stark message of God's judgment, we tend to brush them off. We brush them off because none of us wants to find ourselves on the wrong side of an *either/or* line of demarcation that separates us from God.

That explains why, when we hear these harsh words of judgment, we are apt to dismiss them. We deceive ourselves thinking that since they directed at someone else they have nothing to say to our lives—they don't apply to us.

This past week,
a member was complementing me
for the sermons over the past few months.

She said she thought the sermons have been really powerful. Then with laughter she said they were *so descriptive of her husband* she wanted to nudge him and tell him, *You really need to listen to this.*
*But then, she said,
this past Sunday I knew the sermon was about me.
Pastor, that sermon really convicted me.*

When we come to the awareness that these Biblical words of judgment

speak to us just as much as they are spoken to the original audience,
it makes for a whole new ballgame.

It moves them beyond the realm of interesting little stories—and gossip—
about the sins and shortcomings of the saints of old
and brings them into the realm of our lives.

In other words,
it moves them from preaching
to meddling.

Pastor Larry Daniels tells the story of an older
woman who was a member of his
little country church in Tennessee.

Before he ever met her
everyone was telling him
that she was such a religious person.

And Daniels admits it was true; she was religious.
Every time she came to church, she brought her Bible with her.
In fact, she took her Bible with her everywhere she went.

And at the evening prayer service, when people were called upon to pray,
she would always be the first to stand up and pray,
and her prayers were nothing short of exquisite.
It seemed like the subject of religion was always on her mind, almost to a fault.
She almost didn't know how to carry on a simple conversation
without bringing up her faith.

Pastor Daniels says he didn't have a problem with any of that.
What he had a problem with was the way she treated
the poor, the unemployed, those who were divorced, and alcoholics.
She was relentless in her criticism of people who were down and out.
She was without mercy and compassion.
There was judgment and nothing else.

After a while,
despite all of the outward appearances of religion,
and despite everyone calling her a *religious* person,
Daniels began asking himself, *Is she really a Christian?*
Does she bear the fruits of faith in her life—
*in the way in which she deals with others?*¹

Do we bear the fruits of the Christian faith in our lives?
That's the whole point of the *Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers*.
Its message can be summarized in 6 words: *bear fruit or get the boot*.

Yes, Jesus speaks these words of judgment
against the religious leaders of his day.
But they are also
spoken to us—spoken to you and me.

Takashi Kitamura, a classmate of mine in seminary who was from Japan, made that abundantly and painfully clear in a sermon he preached in our homiletics class.

In the sermon, he dared to say that the church in America was being passed over and the kingdom was being given to the churches in Japan and Africa. He went on to point out how the church in America had failed to be faithful to its mission to go and make disciples for Jesus.

As you can imagine, we got all bent out of shape and took issue with him. We didn't want to admit that we had failed in our calling.

But in retrospect, Takashi was spot on. The decline of the church in America is due in large part because we have failed to be *a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.*

While the message of God's judgment causes us discomfort, there is good news for us today.

The good news is found not in the words of the parable, not in the words of judgment that we have heard; the good news is found in the one who speaks these words of judgment—the good news is found in Jesus Christ.

As Paul says so beautifully in his letter to the Philippians, *I press on to make Christ my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*

Martin Luther once had a dream in which he stood before God's Judgment Seat on the Last Day. And Satan, the old bitter foe, was there to accuse him of all the sins of his life.

When the books were opened, Satan pointed to sin after sin, and Luther's heart sank in despair.

Then he remembered one fact which Satan had neglected to mention. *There is one entry you have overlooked,* said Luther. *What is that?* said Satan. Luther answered, *The blood of Jesus Christ his son cleanses us from all sin.*

While these words of judgment nail us for failing to bear the fruits of a godly life,
it is the assurance that *Christ Jesus has made me his own*
that gives us joy and hope.

When it comes to the Christian faith, what really counts is not
how much we know about God or how sincere we are in our faith.
What really counts is
how much God loves us.

And when it comes to the Christian life, what really counts is not
how pious we look or act.
What really counts is
how compassionate and loving we are.

*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.*

Forget trying to brush off these words
as though they have nothing to say to us.
They speak as clearly to you and me today
as they spoke to the religious leaders of the Jews 2000 years ago.

The good news is not in these words of judgment.
The good news is the one who speaks them.
Therefore, we *press on to make Christ our own,*
because Christ Jesus has made us his own.



¹ ChristianGlobe Illustrations, Staff, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc.