

Sermon Text for June 29, 2025

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 5:1-7, Matthew 21:33-41

“What happens when we don’t follow the will of God?”

It has been an exciting couple of weeks around here. The Bronkema family had some milestones that were met. I know I have told you this before but I am so grateful to a church community that is willing to give me the time that you do to be with my family and to refresh and renew. We did that with my daughter Bethany in Iceland and watched her graduate and enter the work force. My mom, who just turned 90, joined us for the last week and it was an inspiration to see her out there and seeing all the sights and keeping up with us. I’m grateful for my genes through her.

Rachel, our oldest, just got engaged which is a first also for us. It makes me feel like an adult when I have a child who is engaged to be married. The church is also seeing milestones over these two weeks, they are events and opportunities that rise up year after year so we can tend to take them for granted, but we really shouldn’t. We are commissioning the youth mission trip to Palatka Florida where we have 14 youth and 5 adults who will be going to do some really good work. We are also welcoming new members into the church. Do you now that since 2011 we have brought into this church. That’s substantial and impressive.

I hope we all have a sense that we are doing God’s work here. I hope we have a sense that here at First Presbyterian we have chosen to do certain things as a church that is a pursuit of righteousness. We don’t have to pursue those things. As a Church we are faced with so many decisions on what to do and what not to do. We believe that we have a certain responsibility to, for example, raise our children in the way of the Lord and so we have staffing and programs and encouragement that is set up to make sure that happens.

We believe that we are called to be an open community and that we are not a homogenous group that has to believe a certain way, or think a certain way, or look a certain or feel a certain way. We have a large tent under which everyone is welcome. That is not a catch phrase to mean anything more than what we say is what we mean. Everyone is welcome here to worship and take part in life together. We believe that we have a responsibility to the greater community around us, whether it is directly in this community in our outreach opportunities and our ministries and mission where we prioritize the Matthew 25 community in all that we do, those who are hungry and thirsty and without shelter and in prison and strangers or immigrants. Please come this Thursday evening to be brought up to speed on what a church can do in this day and age.

But as a church we could choose not to do any of this, and still be a church. Let me tell you, it is so much easier, and way less expensive, not offering VBS as a church, or not going on mission trips, or not providing opportunities for those in need to have their needs met. We could choose, as a church, to not do any of this and still be a church. Plenty of churches do it. But if we chose not to do it let's be clear, God's kingdom wouldn't suffer, but we certainly would.

Both of our Scriptures today are very similar in regards to a vineyard and what we find in relationship to the expectations that God has for us. Jesus in the Matthew Scripture that we are going to read right now is in dialogue with those within the religious establishment, what we would call today the church, and he tells them they are not pursuing God's desire for them, and he tells them what the result will be because they are not meeting God's expectations. The same could be said for us if we found ourselves in this same position. Let's read.

READ

We don't always find in Scripture a parable that is given to us, or a metaphor, and then within that Scripture itself an explanation for that parable and the metaphor. We find such a thing in our Isaiah Scripture that we read earlier. This is a clear parable here in Isaiah on what happens when we don't do the will of God. Isaiah begins by saying that God has done everything to ensure that what we have in life, what we face day in and day out, is established for our own good. Look at the detail that God invests in so ensure that. He dug it and cleared it of stones, planted the best vines possible, put in a watchtower to protect us, hewed out a wine vat, and the expectations were that the product of what he had invested all this work in would simply produce grapes, not much to ask for.

The work was done ahead of time by God to establish the perfect setting for growth and for opportunity for us to pursue that which God has in store for us. It reminds me of the Romans 8:28 where we are told that it is God's intention and desire that all things work together for good for those who trust in the Lord. God has established things in his vineyard in such a way that he wants us and he sets the table for us to succeed and to pursue his desires and his wishes in our life. All we have to do, according to Isaiah, is bear good fruit. But that does not happen and vs.7 gives us the very clear explanation on why it did not happen. We see a clear explanation of the allegory, of the parable.

The vineyard is Israel, or today we could say the vineyard is the church. God's beloved, the one chosen by God to do his will and his desires that he prunes and that he establishes and cares for so that we can produce that which he would want. He has set it up for us completely to succeed. The plants, the choice plants are us, those who make up the church, the people of Judah, we are God's pleasant planting.

God had some really basic expectations from us, from Israel, but it is clear that we did not meet even the most basic. God expected us to bear fruit, but we bore bitter berries. He expected justice from us, the type of justice that is God's desire where all people are welcomed into the kingdom and into our community, but instead, vs. 7, he saw bloodshed. He expected righteousness, how long have we been preaching from this Gospel of righteousness and we hope and expect it to rub off, but all God heard was a cry, a cry of desperation, a cry of not doing the will of God.

So as a result, and we are not going to like this because you have heard me preach time and time again about God's everlasting love, but as a result God abandoned the vineyard, he allowed those who wanted to use the church for their own agenda and desires to use it for such. God did not abandon his kingdom, he just used other people, other churches, other groups and organizations, to pursue his righteousness while allowing those who felt like they were entitled to the benefits of God's presence, the kingdom of God, to not be a part of it at all. There is a sense of God separating himself from those who do not pursue righteousness, who do not pursue his kingdom. This is what happens when we don't follow the will of God.

Jesus uses this Isaiah Scripture in his dialogue with the religious leaders of his day as well. Let's turn to Matthew. Jesus is still in a conversation in the temple with the religious leaders from the past few weeks before. Remember the sequence. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he goes directly to the temple and casts out the money changers and the buyers and the sellers. He then goes home and returns the next day and engages in a series of debates with the religious leaders at the temple, in their home turf, and this is the last one of these debates.

Like Isaiah he tells the parable and then explains it. He begins, like Isaiah, by saying that God has done everything possible to set the stage for our success. He has taken the time to plant the vineyard, he put a fence around it...and so on as we read in vs.33. He did all of this with the normal expectations that the vineyard would produce grapes and that the tenants would provide their rent or the fruits that came from the field. Normal expectations. But the opposite happens. You would expect when the owner sends his people to collect that the tenants would pay. You would especially expect that when the owner sends his son they would treat him with respect and produce what was expected. All of these things are normal expectations that God has for us as well. But yet the opposite tends to happen from that which God expects and wants from us.

The analogy here is clear. Later on we see his explanation. God is the owner, Israel, or again here the church, are the tenants. We do not own what God has provided for us and yet we think we do. We take the fruits of our job and our hard work and think it is ours to do as we

please completely forgetting that we are not the owners of anything, but rather the stewards of that which God provides for us.

The messengers that the owner sends are the prophets who have been killed, those who encourage the tenants to pursue the way of righteousness are disregarded and killed and tortured and demonized and called terrible things to discredit them from their righteous pursuits. The son who is sent is obviously Jesus, even the words of Jesus himself as we find in Matthew 25 are not sufficient to turn us to the way of God, to the ways of righteousness.

The result of this is answered by the Pharisees and the religious leaders themselves. What will the owner do, he will replace, he will eliminate those who are not doing his will and put people in who will do his will. It is the message that we find Mordecai giving Esther. Don't think, oh church, that you can save yourself by doing nothing in the face of unrighteousness. Because God is at work and will establish his righteousness either through you if you are willing to pursue it, or with someone else and you will perish and be abandoned. That's the message we receive in Scripture. We will not be saved by being safe, in fact we will lose the kingdom that is promised to us as a church.

We can choose to not do the things that we do as a church and still be a church, but we will miss the kingdom to which God has called us. God doesn't have any extraordinary expectations just that we pursue righteousness and listen to those who cry out in distress and produce the fruit that we are called to produce. Let's be clear. It is easier for a church to say no and not take on responsibilities that is put upon it. Anyone can say no to programs and kingdom work. It takes commitment and planning and hours of hard work to say yes and to meet the normal expectations that God has for us.

Make no mistake, this is a parable of judgment for those individuals and those churches who are not seeking righteousness. You will be left out of God's plans and out of God's kingdom if you do not pursue righteousness. And while we have established that we are God's beloved and that even while we were yet sinner God chose to die for us, as sinners, as people who were disobedient, God still has expectations for us that we are to pursue. They are normal expectations. Simply that vineyards produce grapes, people pursue justice and not bloodshed, as a church we stand by righteousness and not selfish gains or fear. May God bless us as we pursue that which he would want us to pursue.