

SERMON WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY - OCTOBER 4TH 2026
“To Whom The Kingdom of God will be Given” based on Matthew 21:33-46

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Have you ever worked for someone and found yourself frustrated when they told you to do something you really did not want to do?

If you work or have ever worked for a company, you probably know what I mean. There is either a boss, a manager, or a CEO who sometimes asks you to do something that is actually part of your responsibility, but for one reason or another, you simply do not feel like doing it.

And perhaps it is even easier to ignore them when the boss is nowhere around. You might think, *“They’re not here. Who is going to know? Maybe I can bend the rules a little bit.”*

Well, something like that seems to be happening in the parable Jesus tells today.

The tenants in the vineyard seem to have reached a point where they thought they could do whatever they want. The owner was far away and they began to believe that the owner wasn’t watching, and won’t care, and no one would hold them accountable. So what begins with simply refusing to do what is expected, eventually becomes something much darker, filled with greed and violence.

Here in Matthew 21, Jesus is speaking to the religious leaders in the temple. Just before the passage we read today, they had confronted Jesus and questioned his authority: *“By what authority are you doing these things?”* As they saw Jesus teach, did miracles, and did a lot of wonderful ministries. Jesus did not answer their question directly. Instead, he tells them this parable.

And in the story, Jesus describes people who have been entrusted with something precious. They have been given responsibility, but somewhere along the way, they begin to act as though what has been entrusted to them actually belongs to them. They forget that they are tenant, not owner.

Eugene Peterson, a preacher and theologian who wrote The Message translation of The Bible, once described Jesus’ parables as “subversive.” They are ordinary stories that quietly get under our skin. They make us think. Sometimes they even make us uncomfortable. Peterson compares them to a little rock in your shoe—something small, but impossible to ignore. And I think that is exactly what happens in this parable.

At first, the story seems fairly straightforward. Jesus says that a landowner planted a vineyard. He put a fence around it to protect it from animals. He built a tower, perhaps to watch over the vineyard and protect it from thieves or even fire. He dug a winepress so that the grapes could be processed right there.

In other words, the landowner had prepared everything. The vineyard was ready to produce good fruit. Then he leased the vineyard to tenants who would care for it and tend the vines. And after everything was in place, the owner went away to another country.

When the harvest season came and the grapes were ripe, the owner sent his servants to collect what belonged to him. But the tenants did not welcome them. Verse 35 tells us that they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. And then after all that, the story takes an even more surprising turn where the landowner decides to send his own son.

On the surface, it almost seems naïve. After everything that has happened, why would he think they would treat his son any differently? And yet the landowner think that *“The renter will respect my son.”*

But as the owners son arrive at the vineyard, the tenants see the son not as someone to respect. They say to one another, *“This is the heir; come, let us kill him so we can get the inheritance.”* And verse 39 tells us that they do exactly that. They throw the son out of the vineyard, and kill him.

First, I want to state that it is a disturbing story. Without paralleling each character to specific people I have in mind in the story of God, I already feel uneasy. I am thinking to myself, *“How could anyone behave like that?”*

But perhaps that is exactly where Jesus wants us to pause.

Because this parable is not simply a story about some terrible tenants long ago. It is a story that invites us to look honestly at our own hearts and ask: *What happens when something God has entrusted to us begins to feel like something that belongs to us?*

After Jesus finishes telling the parable, he turns to his audience there in the temple—the chief priests and the elders—and asks them a question: *“When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”*

And in the very next verse, they answer: *“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.”*

It seems like the answer for Jesus’ question is obvious. The tenants have done something terrible, and surely they deserve to be punished.

But there is something the chief priests and elders do not realize yet. In answering Jesus’ question, they have unknowingly pronounced judgment on themselves.

And perhaps that is one of the most powerful things about this parable. Jesus does not have to point his finger at them, He simply tells the story, asks them a question, and allows them to reflect.

Jesus does not spell out every detail of the parable for us. But if we step back and look at the story as a whole, we can begin to see what he is doing.

The “owner” can be seen points to God, while the “vineyard” represents God’s people, Israel. And notice how much care the owner puts into the vineyard. He plants it. He puts a fence around it. He builds a tower. He digs a winepress. Nothing is missing. All of these details point to the care and faithfulness of God toward God’s people. God chose them. God blessed them. God protected them. God provided for them. God gave them everything they needed to flourish and to bear good fruit.

The “tenants,” then, can be understood as those who have been entrusted with the care and leadership of God’s people—the religious leaders who are now standing before Jesus and questioning his authority. They have been given something precious. They have been entrusted with God’s people and with the responsibility of helping them bear fruit.

But somewhere along the way, they began to forget the difference between being a tenant and being an owner.

The “servants” point to the prophets whom God sent throughout Israel’s history—people who came to remind God’s people of their calling, to call them back to faithfulness, justice, mercy, and obedience. But again and again, those messengers were rejected. Some were mocked. Some were abused. Some were even killed.

And finally, the owner sends his son.

The “son” points to Jesus himself. And suddenly, this is no longer just a story about a vineyard. It becomes a story about the history of God’s relationship with God’s people—and, most immediately, about the people standing in front of Jesus.

The chief priests and Pharisees recognize that Jesus’s critique is directed against them, as leaders who have failed to yield the fruit of the vineyard to the One to whom the harvest belongs. And yet, even then, they do not turn back. They will not surrender their sense of control.

As the son in the parable is taken outside the vineyard and killed. Not long after Jesus tells this story, he too will be taken outside the city and crucified. What Jesus is telling them is not simply a story. It is a prophetic word about what they are about to do. And perhaps that is why this parable can feel so uncomfortable for us. Because Jesus is not only asking, “*What did those tenants do?*”

He is inviting us to ask a much more personal question: *What are we doing with what God has entrusted to us? And how are we, as God’s people, bearing the fruit of the kingdom?*

Friends, as we leave the sanctuary this morning, I want to leave you with three things to carry with you.

First, this parable invites us to gratitude.

The vineyard belongs to God. The owner is the one who plants it, tends it, protects it, and prepares it to bear fruit. Everything begins with God’s generosity. That is true for Israel, and it is also true for the church. We are here because God has first loved us, called us, and entrusted something beautiful to us. And our response to that gift is gratitude—not simply gratitude that we speak with our lips, but gratitude that shapes the way we live.

We can express that gratitude in our prayers and spiritual practices. And we live it out when we serve our neighbours and participate in God’s mission in the world.

Second, this parable reminds us that God’s way of redemption often looks very different from the ways of the world.

The tenants believe that power comes from taking, controlling, and eliminating anyone who stands in their way. But Jesus shows us another way. The Son who is rejected becomes the cornerstone. The one who is killed becomes the one through whom God brings life. And also, those who were not chosen and entrusted at the first place becomes the one who the ‘vineyard’ will be given to. Because the chosen one hasn’t been a good stewards in God’s eyes.

Later in Matthew’s Gospel, the risen Christ declares, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*” But this is not the kind of authority the world usually understands. Christ’s authority is revealed through humility, mercy, peacemaking, and sacrificial love. We see this also throughout Jesus’ teaching, especially in the Beatitudes we read last week: “Blessed are the merciful.” “Blessed are the peacemakers.” “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”

God's way of redemption often looks very different from the ways of the world. Because the kingdom of God does not bear fruit through domination or violence. It bears fruit through love, mercy, faithfulness, and service.

And third, this parable reminds us to pay attention to the vineyard God has entrusted to us. The church is not ours. This congregation is not ours. The ministries we serve are not ours. They belong to God. That's why I personally always used the phrase Stamford is the church I serve or I serve with the people at Stamford Presbyterian Church. Because this church and this ministry belong to God. I as a pastor, am just someone God trusted to be here for a season, maybe short maybe long, only God knows.

And for some of you, I know this has been your home church from even couple generations before you, so it's more true and easier to say "this is my church." But I hope deep in your heart you can understand that this is God's church where we all are invited to serve and be part of the ministries of God. And hopefully, that can be both humbling and freeing.

Because it doesn't mean that since it's not belong to us then we should not need to care too much. Instead it simply means that we do not have to build the kingdom of God by our own strength. God is already at work. God who planted the vineyard is still tending it. Our calling is to be faithful with what has been placed in our hands and to bear whatever fruit God is calling us to bear.

And I think we have already seen a glimpse of that this week. As we enter this season of thanksgiving, many of us have been busy preparing for our Pumpkin Fest. There has been planning, organizing, decorating, baking, making jams, preparing crafts, and activities. And finally, yesterday, we opened our doors and welcomed people from our community. We offered them not only food or activities, but something deeper: a place where people could feel welcomed, cared for, and loved. And perhaps that is what bearing fruit looks like.

It does not always look dramatic. Sometimes it looks like opening a church door. Sometimes it looks like preparing food. Sometimes it looks like setting up tables, greeting a stranger, listening to someone's story, offering a smile, or simply making room for someone who has never been here before. These things may seem small, but they can become signs of God's love when we offer them faithfully.

And Pumpkin Fest is not the end of our calling. We cannot say, "*We did our ministry yesterday, so we are finished.*" There will always be another opportunity to bear fruit. There will be another person to welcome, another prayer to offer, another gift to share, and another place where God is calling us to show love.

Because the fruit of the kingdom is not something we produce once and then put away. It is something we continue to cultivate, season after season, as we remain faithful to the God who has entrusted this vineyard to us.

So perhaps the question for us this morning is not simply, "*What have we done?*" But rather: *What has God placed in our hands? And what fruit might God be inviting us to bear with it*

Sisters and brothers in Christ, may we never forget that the vineyard belongs to God. May we receive all that God has given us with gratitude. And may we offer our time, our gifts, our talents, our resources, and our very lives—not for our own glory, but for the glory of the One who planted the vineyard, tends it with love, and calls us to bear fruit in the world.

Amen.