

Texts: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Matthew 21:33-46

It's all about the covenant, the promise between God and the people. God is faithful; the Lord remains faithful. Always was, is now, and forevermore will be: Great is Thy faithfulness. On the human side, the record shows, our faithfulness ain't all that great. It is greatly troubling, disturbing, shameful; week after week, day by day. Rereading the Ten Commandments today reminds us how, on the whole, we as a people fail to practice faithfulness, to God and to one another. Always has been, is now, will it forevermore be? "Do not kill", after the tragedy in Las Vegas last Sunday, is the most obvious, horrid example. In any public setting, we are learning that we must be aware that there are people we can't assume will keep the sacred trust. We can go through the entire list of ten. As a society, as a people, even as the church in general, we pray that our holy Lord will allow us some wiggle room, given our present condition. "You shall not desire your neighbor's house, or RV, or new car, better health, or large flat screen TV." "Do not testify falsely against your neighbor, or pass along any false news, or assume facts without proof." "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy, except for football, running errands, and catching up with chores and emails before you allow yourself to rest. 'Rest feels like I'm doing nothing, not being productive!'" "Have no other gods before me, at least for an hour on Sunday, unless something else comes up, or you're just not in the mood."

We hope there is some stretchiness in being held accountable to covenant commands, on our side. God is really good on keeping every single divine promise: healing, hope, mercy, redemption, guidance, grace, peace that passes all understanding. God is dependable; we can trust God no matter where we find ourselves. God comes through. On the human side, we test the elasticity of the covenant. How far can we go? How much can we push it? What all can we get away with, and still know God's love is a lock? Not that we don't love the Lord and desire to do good, but, we know, and God knows, we're only human. Plus, don't we have Jesus on our side? Isn't his guaranteed forgiveness in the mix? Isn't Jesus our ace-in-the-hole? "Whoever falls on this stone (referring to himself) will be crushed. And the stone will crush the person it falls on." Oh. (Let's not find out what that means!)

In the temple, among the chief priests and elders of the people, Jesus told the parable about the landowner who planted a vineyard. He got it all set up, all ready to function and produce grapes and make wine, and he trusted the operations to a group of people: tenant farmers. Not owners, but workers, renters, stewards. They had an understanding, an agreement, a covenant to take care of the vineyard, grow good fruit, make good wine, and life itself will all be good. Simple, straightforward, doable.

It could probably have been any one of the Ten Commandments, or all of them, or some of them. But the tenant farmers tested the covenant's elasticity: pushed the envelope on what they could get away with. When the owner sent his people to collect the grapes, the tenant farmers seized them, beat them, and killed some of them, stoned some of them to death. It's bad. (It's bad these days, too, in our vineyard.) The owner

next sent a second group, larger than the first. They treated them the same way: violently, unfaithfully. So he decided next to send his son: "They'll respect my son." He thought he knew them, that they'd abide by the promise and be humane.

In the son, apparently, they saw the only thing that stood in the way of gaining total control of the vineyard for themselves. Here's coveting. Stealing. Choosing another god; replacing the real owner with themselves; elevating human control over the sovereignty of God. And there's killing, the son.

Jesus then asks the Jewish leaders, who might be taking this parable personally, just like we may be, "When the owner comes, what will he do to those tenant farmers?"

Hmmm. They, and we, know what they really deserve. They go with that. "They said, 'He will totally destroy those wicked farmers and rent the vineyard to other tenant farmers who will give him the fruit when it's ready.'" Kill the lot of them and start over; kind of like a Noah and the flood kill and replace scheme. Give 'em what they deserve and get the vineyard back up and running with better people!

Faithfulness, Jesus speaks of next. Keeping one's word. The Lord God fulfilling God's word, being true to divine promise. "Have you ever read in the scriptures, *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it's amazing in our eyes?* Therefore, I tell you that God's kingdom will be taken away from you and will be given to a people who will produce its fruit." The fruit of faithfulness; covenantal reliability. Notice God does not "totally destroy" those wicked farmers, he just moves on to others. God's covenant faithfulness is not enacted by violence or death. They still live, but without the benefit of the vineyard, or the garden; without pleasure of tilling in the Lord's field and enjoying the fruit and the rewards of faithful labor. But others will. The will of God will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. But the Lord will not force it, by violence or vengeance.

The final word in the story is not death, not even the death of the son. The promise lives on, undeterred by the death of the son. The vineyard remains operational. The owner does not give up. The fruit does not cease. The promise, the covenant extends beyond death and violence.

And, the rejected one, the son, becomes the cornerstone, the foundational core. Emmitt Till. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Matthew Shepard, Nelson Mandela, Malala. How those who have been unjustly attacked or tragically slain have spurred the commitment of others to God's justice, bringing humanity back to the promise that still holds: we owe faithfulness to God. The wiggle room has gone too far; it now diminishes and threatens our life together. The stretchability of our habits and our lifestyles have extended beyond the limits of faithfulness. The fruit is not tasting so good; the vineyard is rotting and needs cleaning up. God calls us, again, to produce the fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Gal. 5:22-23)

The chief priests and the Pharisees felt threatened, hearing what Jesus said. They'd soon have him arrested and killed. The covenant lives on. "God's kingdom will be taken away from you and will be given to a people who produce its fruit." May we be that people, claiming this vineyard for God.